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SEPTEMBER 2006

The Heart Has Reasons

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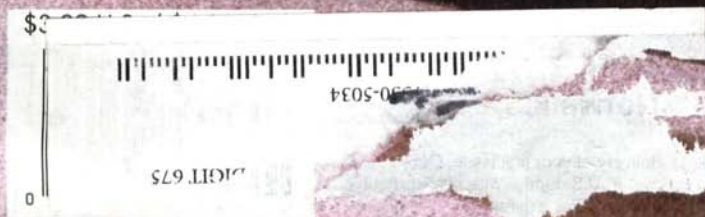
BY O'NEIL DE NOUX

Plus

Bill Crenshaw

William Link

Walter Satterthwait

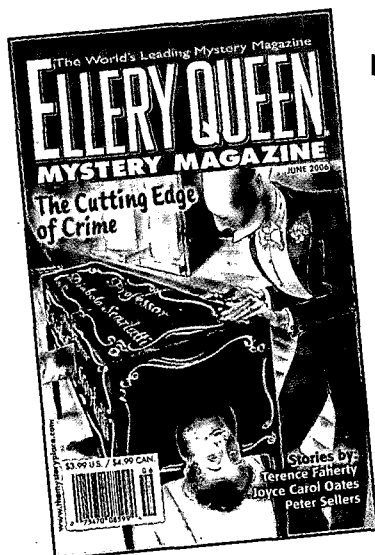


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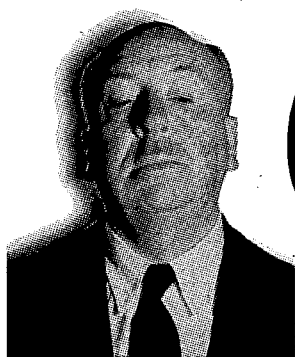
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

NOTORIOUS STORIES

As we've reminded you regularly, AHMM is fifty years old this year. As part of our celebration of our golden anniversary, we had invited readers to nominate their favorite stories and authors from throughout the magazine's history. The response was enthusiastic, and I'm happy to report that many of your favorites are now included in our new anthology, *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine Presents Fifty Years of Crime and Suspense*, published by Pegasus Books.

This anthology reflects the diversity we strive to bring you in each issue of the magazine: historicals and procedurals, cozies and noirs, humor and suspense. It also documents a half century of great storytelling, with tales drawn from each decade of the magazine's existence and featuring such writers as Jim Thompson, Donald E. Westlake, Ed McBain, Jan Burke, and Sara Paretsky. And finally, it celebrates our proud tradition of showcasing less familiar writers and cultivating new and up-and-coming talent, so you can also look for the likes of Henry Slesar, Jack Ritchie, and Steven Wasylyk; early stories by Doug Allyn, Rob Kantner, and Martin Limón; and tales by such vigorous mid-career writers as I. J. Parker and Rhys Bowen.

Speaking of reader favorites, we are delighted to welcome back to our pages this month Walter Satterthwait and William Link, both returned after long absences. We have no new authors to introduce this month, but Kevin Prufer is making his second appearance in AHMM, and those of you who wrote in to tell us you enjoyed his first story ("The Body in the Spring," June 2005) will surely enjoy "The River Market Murders" as well. Meanwhile, O'Neil De Noux's atmospheric tale, "The Heart Has Reasons," readily suggested our striking cover. And we welcome back also Susan Oleksiw, Jas. R. Petrin, and Bill Crenshaw, whose Fish Award-winning May 1984 story, "Poor Dumb Mouths," is our Mystery Classic this month.

THE RIVER MARKET MURDERS

KEVIN PRUFER

By the time Detective Armand arrived it was raining hard. He stood under his umbrella watching it sluice down the dead old woman's legs and drip from her feet into widening puddles. Her shoes had fallen off in the struggle and her purse was gone. Her finger was broken and lopsided, a wedding ring pulled halfway off and lodged against the knuckle. Postmortem, Armand thought. Some dumb punk had tried to rip it off, but her hands were too swollen and stiff. Not far away, behind the yellow tape, a group of kids gawked and laughed.

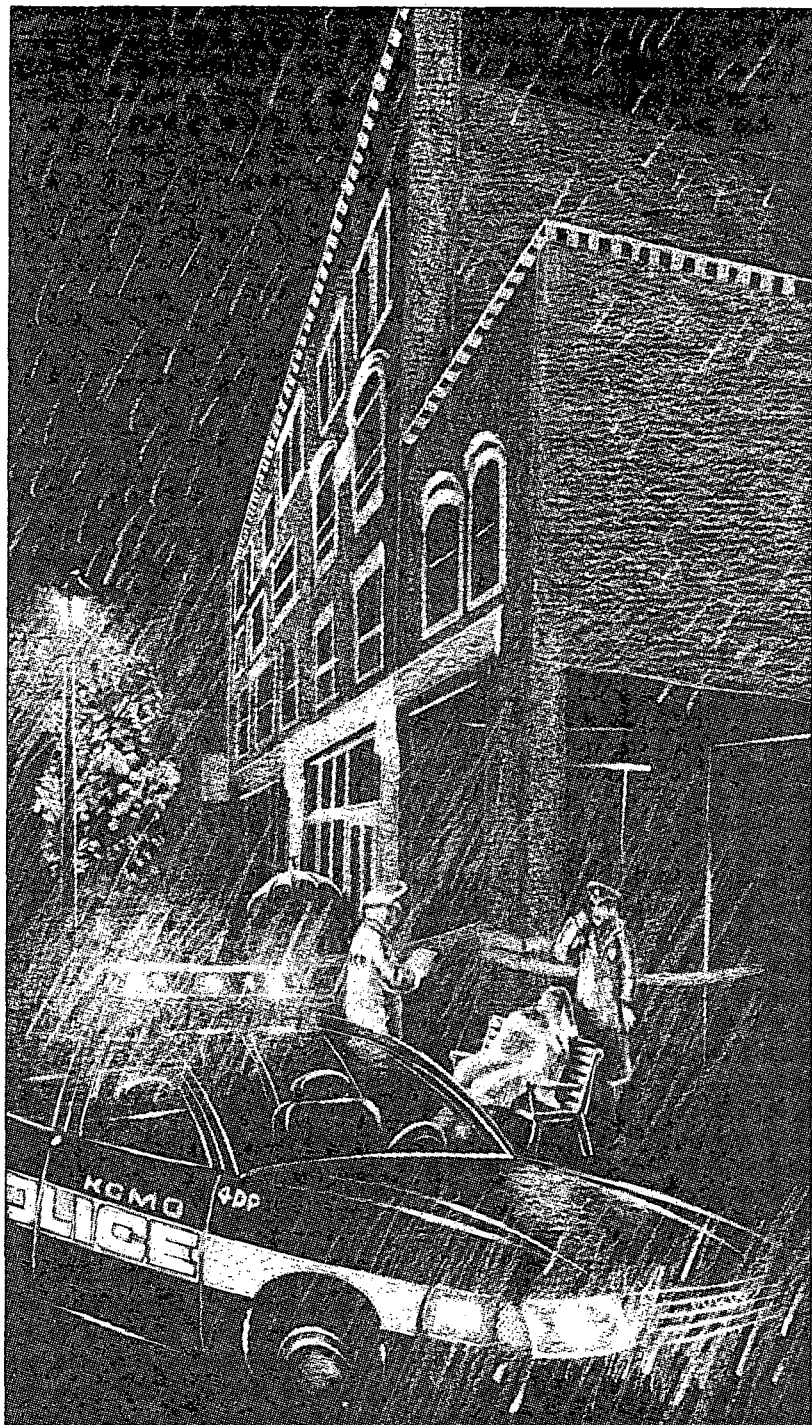
The news helicopters had arrived ahead of him and were circling low, their big spotlights sweeping back and forth over the cops, the crowd, and the vic. Armand knew that even now he was on live TV. The rotors made his head hurt.

"I need a little light," he said to the uniform, whoever she was, a new kid. The uniform brought her big light closer and shone it so Armand could just make out the red burn marks mostly concealed beneath the rope around the old woman's neck. With a pencil, he tried to move the rope a bit, but she was still garroted tight.

Armand's head hurt. He'd been asleep in his car, dreaming, when Washington, his partner, called. In the dream, it was his wife calling, the cell phone lost in the woods and ringing continuously as he searched the fallen leaves. Soon she'd hang up and he'd never have a chance to speak to her again, would never hear her voice, and he ran from tree to tree, the phone constantly receding and ringing as the sun went down and the woods grew dark.

And then he woke, his mouth dry as chalk, rain drumming on the car and filling it with damp. He picked the phone from the cup holder, connected. Where was he?

"Armand?" Washington said. A park, he was in a park. Swope



Park, he thought, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Armand?"

"Yeah," Armand said.

"Where the hell are you? C.I.B. has been calling, I've been calling."

"Where do you think? I was asleep. I've been working nights."

"Asleep where?"

"In my bed. What time is it?"

"The hell you were," Washington said. "I called your house."

Armand was silent, watching the rain stream down the win-

Funny night to be out for a stroll, right here where the neighborhood turns bad. In the rain.

dows. His head hurt. It was definitely Swope Park, and he'd only meant to close his eyes for a minute. He'd been overtired and off

duty, and since his wife died he hadn't been sleeping well at home.

"It's eight o'clock. You're late. We got a stiff," Washington said after a moment.

"What kind of a stiff?" His mouth tasted like fur, and he fumbled the key into the ignition.

"It's our boy," Washington said. "Corner of Oak and Fifth. He got an old lady this time."

When he bent forward to get a better view, Armand noticed blood on her lip and front teeth. One tooth was chipped. A shiver went up and down his back, like he was being watched.

"Tell you what," Armand told the uniform beside him. "When I say so, I want you to turn around and sweep that light across the crowd real slow."

"What for?" the uniform asked.

Armand's head hurt. "Don't worry what for," he told her. Washington was in the unmarked car, making notes. Above, the helicopters guttered low, their spotlights flashing. The coroner's guys shifted uneasily under black umbrellas, waiting to wrap the stiff in plastic and load her up. "Just do it. Right now."

The uniform shrugged, turned, and shone the light slowly across the faces of the people in the crowd. A couple of kids laughed and waved from under their umbrellas, an old lady covered her eyes, and a tall, thin man with red hair stood straighter, looking over the heads of the others, directly into the light. He smiled a little, as if he were on TV or something. The guy made Armand's palms itch.

He waited a respectable moment, then walked over to Washington's unmarked Caprice and rapped on the window. It slid down. "What?" Washington said, like he had a problem.

"We got one fly in the crowd."

"Yeah?" Washington made another note. He was filling out forms.

"White guy, about forty. Tall. Red hair."

"And?"

"Nice umbrella, wooden handle. Black blazer, good cut."

Washington shrugged.

"And it's a funny night to be out for a stroll, right here where the neighborhood turns bad. In the rain."

"I get it. I'll ID him." He capped his pen.

"Take all their names. Not just his."

Washington rolled his eyes, and Armand was sorry he'd said what he'd said. Washington was a good cop, a better cop than Armand.

The redhaired guy said he was Philip Beispiel, a real estate lawyer who lived and worked near the River Market, not far from the scene, just across the border between a rough part of downtown and that area of the city the developers were gentrifying. A good neighborhood, pricey new loft apartments, all that. "Nice fellow," Washington said. "ID checks out. Said he was just out for a walk."

"Great night for a walk. Someone's gonna steal his umbrella," Armand said.

Armand was driving now. "He wasn't that far from home. Lives right around the corner practically." They passed the old Palace Theatre, which was tumbling into ruins, then the Cigar Bar, where Armand saw Donnie Palazzo, his old friend, leaning against the newspaper box, talking to a mean-looking black guy in a white hat.

"Cruising for old ladies in ankle socks?"

Washington laughed, and then he was silent. "Beispiel doesn't fit anyway," he said after a moment. "Teabone says the perp's a short guy, got insecurity issues."

"Yeah?"

Washington laughed. "Yeah," he said. "And Teabone's always right."

Teabone was a condescending shit with a master's degree in criminal psych from UMKC. He had a team of clowns to run his leads for him. If he said the perp was a short guy with self-esteem problems, then odds were that Beispiel—a six foot plus, good-looking lawyer from River Market—was worth looking at. So they'd asked him to drop by the station when he had a chance.

The cell rang again, and this time it was Melichar from C.I.B. He had an ID on the vic. "Gertrude Farber," he said. "She had a prescription for Xanax in her pocket. Made things easy. She lives on Central Ave., in Overland Park."

"Not downtown," Washington said.

Armand nodded. "Right down the road from my house," he said. "The suburbs."

Gertrude Farber was the fifth vic to turn up cold downtown in as many months. And on the surface she didn't look that different from the others: white, nicely dressed, a nylon rope wrapped around her neck, tightened by means of what looked like a foot of wood sawed from the end of a broomstick. The killer worked at night, Armand figured, stalking his prey for some time before striking, strangling each quickly and efficiently, then posing them on park benches throughout the River Market area. Sometimes hours would go by before anyone noticed that the well-dressed young person on the bench hadn't moved in a very long time.

Tomorrow, Armand knew, the *KC Star* would receive a typed note, something about a downtown that hadn't given what it owed the killer, about payback, the old lady's body another small payment on a large debt from a city that trod on its citizens, that built swanky lofts and filled the upscale streets with Starbucks, Dean & DeLucas, that took from the powerless and gave to the rich. A man with a grudge. Long, rambling letters from a civic-minded psychopath whom Armand sympathized with. Except for the part about killing people.

The killer had made only one clear mistake so far. The second victim had gotten what Armand hoped was a piece of him under her right index fingernail, enough for a DNA profile. But with no one to match it to—they'd run it through the database and checked it against two or three suspects—it was worthless.

But this new murder bothered Armand for another reason. Gertrude Farber was from the suburbs, from Overland Park, his own neighborhood. Unlike the other vics—three women and a young man—she didn't live in one of the swank new downtown warehouse apartments; and odds were she didn't frequent the cozy little boutiques or overpriced antique shops near the River Market or in Westport. That was strange because Armand had assumed the killer had stalked his vics for some time, was checking out where they lived, where they shopped, making sure they were profiting from whatever it was he thought he'd lost.

Her husband—a chubby guy about sixty-five, name of Jerry—just shrugged and sniffled. The room was hot and he was sweating. "I don't know," he said. "She didn't often go downtown, so I have no idea what she was doing there." He sat back in a big worn easy chair and wiped his eyes. He'd only just found out an hour ago, so Armand was prepared to tread lightly.

"I'm sorry," he said. The old man shrugged, like things couldn't possibly get worse. "Were you aware of where she was today? Where she was going?"

The old man shook his head. "She went out, said she was meeting friends, left around two thirty, three o'clock."

"Do you know which friends?" Washington asked.

The old man shook his head. "I didn't ask." He seemed a little stunned. Armand remembered the day he learned of his own wife's death, in a car crash on Highway 71, north of Kansas City. Then he blinked the memory away.

"Did she have any friends down around River Market?" he asked.

The old man thought about it. "She had a lot of friends," he said at last, as if from a great distance. "I mean, she could've."

"What I want you to do," Armand said, "is sit down for a little while and make a list of any friends she might have been out with, anyone she might have gone to see downtown. Any stores she liked to shop at."

The old man nodded, but his expression was one of someone who's not quite hearing. "When you get a chance," Armand said gently. "Soon."

"Okay," the old man said. "Would you like something to drink?"

Washington asked for a glass of water, and the old man disappeared for a moment into the kitchen.

Armand walked around the living room, trying to get a feel for the woman who'd lived here until just a few hours ago. She collected glass animals—there was a menagerie on a little shelf next to the fireplace. Armand picked one up, a glass owl, turned it over, put it back down. It was cracked. Beside them were family photos—what looked like a couple of kids, grandkids at the beach, a couple of Jerry and Gertrude Farber together, some black and whites of older relatives, probably long gone by now. In the back row, a couple of photos were upside down, and Armand righted them.

Then Jerry Farber returned, handing a glass of water to Washington. "I hope you don't mind," he said, "I got something a little stronger for myself. I don't usually—"

"It's all right," Armand said.

"She did have a few friends from the synagogue who lived downtown."

Armand made a note in his book because he wasn't sure what else to do with his hands. He hated this part of his job, the part where people cried. Especially good people. Jerry Farber reminded Armand of his own father. Washington shifted behind him. "Write

the names down for us, okay?" The old man nodded. "Did she work?" he asked.

"At the public library."

Armand wrote that down too.

"And you?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm outta work, but it's temporary."

"Temporary how?" Washington asked, and Armand gave him a look.

"Until I find another job." Jerry dabbed his eyes with a Kleenex.

"What line of business are you in?" Washington asked.

"Housepainter," the old man said. "I've got a few good years in me." He sighed. "But I've got to compete with a lot of big companies these days."

Armand looked around the living room again. Chintz curtains, an old plaid sofa and matching loveseat, the rows of family photos. The house was modest, cheerful, and very neat. Armand liked it, despite the circumstances.

The killer had switched typewriters and was using a cheaper brand of paper than before, but otherwise the note checked out pretty well. The *Star* was making the most of it: an old woman, they suggested, probably a mistake. Since she was nicely dressed and walking around by River Market on a Monday night, the killer figured her for a local. "A tragedy," they said. The anchors at *The News at Eight* agreed, shaking their well-coiffed heads. "A terrible tragedy, every way you look at it." Then they replayed some of the footage they'd gotten from the helicopters earlier that week.

But something didn't wash for Armand. He lay back on the sofa, the lights off so he wouldn't have to look at the mess his living room had become. He was drinking bourbon, the TV on mute. First, the killer had botched the job in all kinds of ways, which wasn't like him. He'd killed the wrong woman, and then he'd left thumb marks on her neck, mean little red bruises that grew clearer as the body cooled. Probably, she'd gotten out of her noose, and he had to use his hands.

Next—Armand was getting sleepy, the booze going to his head—he didn't like this Beispiel character, the tall redheaded guy. Rich kid. He'd come by the station and was way too helpful, too easygoing, didn't complain about being printed or having his fingernails scraped. Most people would complain, but Beispiel just smiled, like he knew they wouldn't find anything.

Armand blinked, sleepy. Finally—where was he going with this? When he closed his eyes, it wasn't Beispiel he saw, or the dead woman with the broken tooth, but Jerry Farber, poor guy, sitting

on his plaid sofa, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. Jerry Farber saying, "I don't know. Maybe she had friends downtown; she had lots of friends," while Washington and Armand nodded and made useless notes. And then Armand was thinking about his own wife, how he last saw her walking out the door to the car, carrying her suitcase through the snow and hoisting it into the back. They had quarreled. Then she drove and drove—Armand was almost asleep now, and in his dream he imagined her driving—north of Kansas City along Highway 71, through the blinding snow, north toward Maryville and Iowa, when her car turned wrong on the ice, skidded, flipped over. The smile of glass on the pavement mixed with the ice, the wheels that kept spinning, the sound of the radio, and now Armand was fast asleep, fast asleep and dreaming of his wife's last moments, the half full glass of bourbon tipped and fallen to the floor.

"You got to cheer yourself up," Washington said in the car the next day. "You got to get out some. Rorkisha and I are grilling this weekend. You want me to call her up, ask her to pick up an extra steak?"

Armand shook his head. He was still troubled by his dream, a dream that mixed his own loss with Jerry Farber's, a dream in which Jerry Farber figured somehow, but how? He'd forgotten the details. Guilt dreams. A year later and he still felt guilty about his wife, who was leaving him when she died. "I'm good," he said to Washington, who just laughed and told him, "Like hell you are."

Earlier, before lunch, they'd spent some time with Philip Beispiel, whom Washington didn't like for the murders.

"C'mon," Armand had said before they led him in. "There's something wrong with this guy. I can feel it. He's too nice to us. And he's a real estate lawyer."

Washington laughed, and then Beispiel was at the door, grinning, shaking hands. "How can I help you?" he'd said. He was drinking something from a plastic bottle, something called Glaceau Vitamin Water, one of those fortified waters the yuppies drink.

"Little of this, little of that," Armand said. "First of all, seems you've had a few scrapes I wonder if you could tell us about."

Beispiel looked blank.

"By 'scrapes,'" Washington said, "the man means 'run-ins with the law.'"

Beispiel seemed startled. "Oh," he said, "you mean years ago?"

"That's right."

"When I was a kid?" He took another sip of his fortified water.

"Keep talking," Washington said.

"Oh, well, that was nothing." But it wasn't nothing, not to Armand. The guy had a juvie prior for arson—he'd set fire to a piano in his high school theater—and later a young woman at the Washington University law school had taken out a restraining order, though she'd dropped it a month later. And when Armand asked him about those he was evasive, always smiling, too confident. Young damn yuppie, Armand thought. He hated his type.

But Beispiel just sat there, smiling, like he was everyone's best friend. "What were you doing at the crime scene?" Armand asked.

"I saw it on TV, live. Thought I'd take a look." Armand remembered the helicopters.

"You're a real estate lawyer? In what area?"

The guy laughed. "Here's the thing," he said. "It's gonna look bad: I work with the Downtown Preservation Society."

Armand nodded. "Yeah," he said. "You're right. That doesn't look good."

"I'm not hiding anything," Beispiel said. "Look, fellas, I care about the city, and I'm hardly the only one."

Washington laughed.

But Armand had to admit the guy had a point. There were a lot of angry people in Kansas City, people who hated the monolithic KC Convention Center that sprawled for blocks of downtown, who despised the slick new addition to the Nelson-Atkins Art Museum. Plenty who objected to Starbucks and Barnes & Noble and the corporate ooze that infected the Plaza. Hell, Armand was one of them.

"I think we should take him to the lab," Armand told Washington after Beispiel left. "This guy's not right."

"Take him to the lab?"

"I want a PCR test. See if it matches."

"Oh, c'mon," Washington said. "That shit's expensive. They're not going to let you work up a DNA profile because he set a couple of fires when he was a kid and he ticks you off."

"He was at the scene," Armand said. "He's a real estate lawyer. And there's something hinky about him. He thinks he's playing us. And I got the sample right here too." He pointed to the trashcan, into which Beispiel had lobbed the Glaceau bottle before he left.

"Yeah, well, you put in the request then. And deal with it if they laugh you out of town."

Washington and Armand spent the next few days running other leads, checking Gertrude Farber's friends, the girl at Wash U (who didn't want to talk), going through the murder books, waiting for

the lab reports on Beispiel's DNA and the latest note to the *KC Star*. It was suddenly summer, and in truth, a couple of days after Armand forced the DNA order through Melichar, he began to regret it. Washington was right; he didn't like the guy because he was a yuppie clown. The case was getting to him, and he hadn't slept well at all since Gertrude Farber died.

He'd been dreaming of his wife, always the same guilty dream: the snow coming down so beautifully over the road, sticking to the windshield, making little white cones of the glare from her headlights. And then—what was it? A truck? An animal?—she swerved and swerved, the car skidding sideways then, suddenly, rolling over and over until it came to a rest in the field.

And Washington could tell his partner was in a bad way—that was clear enough—and Armand appreciated the invitations for dinner, though what he really wanted after work was to drink. Drink and stay far away from TV or the newspaper, where the local hacks complained about the inefficiency of the police. The chief was getting antsy too, and in the last year Armand hadn't been dealing too well with pressure.

A couple of times he'd seen Jerry Farber in the street—he lived only a few blocks away, and he'd waved, but Jerry hadn't seen him. And once—this was a week after the murder—he ran into him at Player's, a bar Armand sometimes stopped at after work. Jerry was deep into what looked like his second scotch.

"How you holding up?" Armand asked him, too suddenly, because Jerry whirled around as if startled, then smiled.

"You know," he said after a moment. Armand could feel him sizing him up, wondering about any progress on the case. "Bad days," he said at last.

"Yeah," Armand said. It was definitely not protocol to drink with the family of a vic, but Armand liked the old man, and no one would see him here. He slid into the seat next to him. "Well, it doesn't get easier, does it?"

The old man nodded and sipped his drink. Armand didn't want him to start crying—what would he do if the old man started crying?—but he knew the guy probably needed company. He looked like hell, his shirt disheveled and stained, a pair of shorts exposing thick, white legs. Unhealthy. He hadn't shaved and there was a bandage around his elbow. "Burned myself," the old man said. "Gert always did the cooking." He sighed and Armand bought him another drink. "You know?" the old man said, "it's like being in a long, long tunnel, and I don't think I'll ever reach the end of it."

Armand nodded.

"I walk and walk, and I'm not even sure the thing ends."

Because he didn't know what to say, Armand sipped his drink. Then: "We're gonna catch who did this, you know. We're gonna catch him."

The old man sighed, drank. "Let's talk about something else. How long have you been on the force?"

The bartender came by, with his rag and wiped the bar.

"Thirty-one, thirty-two years. Long time."

"Seen it all?" Farber asked him.

"Sometimes I still get surprises."

Farber nodded. "My son wanted to join the force, big dreams. Went to CMSU to study criminal justice. Never finished."

"It's not all it's cracked up to be," Armand said. "It's hard work, you almost never make people happy."

The old man smiled at that. "Well, my kid's doing great anyway. Has a good job, good wife. You married?"

Armand took another sip, then ordered a new drink. "I was," he said.

It felt good to tell someone about Carol, even if it was more or less a stranger. Refreshing. He hadn't really talked about her with anyone since she died. And eventually the conversation drifted away from their lost wives to simpler things, the Royals, politics, the bartender joining in after the bar emptied out.

And the next day he woke up strangely refreshed. He hadn't dreamt about Carol or the wreck. He didn't have a hangover, which was strange. Washington swung by in the Caprice and picked Armand up. "I've got news," Washington said, "you smart fuck." He was smiling.

"Yeah?"

"They're holding Beispiel down at the station right now. Melichar and Greenleaf picked him up this morning."

"Beispiel? What?" He'd been thinking Beispiel was a bullshit lead.

"The lab says he's a match for the DNA of the second vic." Washington laughed. "I gotta say, whatever you saw in the guy—"

Armand laughed too.

"They're holding him for us at the station. Room A. A for 'Armand'. He's your collar, after all."

Armand laughed. It would be something for Jerry Farber to know it.

"There's more," Washington said. "On a hunch, I called a friend down at city hall. Ten years ago, Beispiel lodges a couple of formal protests about a property his dad owned—"

"—River Market?" Armand said.

"River Market. Wanted some old warehouse protected, said it was a landmark. City seized it, paid him fair market value, tore it down. Built the steamboat museum on top of it."

"The Royal Shoe warehouse?"

"Eminent domain."

"What did they pay him?"

Washington laughed. "Well, it was a while ago. And the place was an empty shell."

Armand nodded. It would be worth a bundle now, after gentrification. After the yuppies moved in. It had probably been gnawing at him for years.

The figure waiting for Armand in room A didn't look anything like the Philip Beispiel Armand had seen standing among the onlookers at the last crime scene. He was dressed for work—a nice blue suit, wingtip shoes—but his eyes were empty, his hair ruffled. He had a bruise on his head, the kind a perp acquires getting into a squad car against his will. He looked like he wasn't going to be talking. But he hadn't yet lawyered up either. That was good news.

"Whaddya say?" Armand said. "Howya doing?" Washington was standing by the door, his arms crossed. Somewhere, a tape was recording.

Beispiel lifted his head a bit, looked at Armand, then back down at the table.

Armand pulled up a chair so it squeaked against the floor. He always made it squeak; it unsettled the perps. "You gonna talk to us?"

Beispiel looked up at Armand and attempted a sort of boyish grin. It didn't come off.

"You been read your rights?" Beispiel said nothing. Armand looked at Washington.

"Yeah," Washington said. "He's been advised. Melichar read 'em."

"Okay, then."

Beispiel was silent.

"Look," Armand said. "We know about the Royal Shoe warehouse. That was your father's?"

Beispiel leaned back in his chair and watched Armand silently. Almost sadly.

"But I want to talk about the murders."

Beispiel said nothing.

Washington shifted behind Armand.

"You want to talk about it?"

Beispiel sighed and moved in his chair. He looked at his fingers. Armand turned to Washington. "He doesn't want to talk about it," he said.

"Yeah," Washington said. "You'd think at least he'd talk about the old lady."

Armand nodded.

"At least," Washington said, "since she wasn't bothering nobody. Now, the other four? Maybe they bothered you. But the old lady?" He addressed Beispiel directly now. "I mean, that was your screwup. The old lady didn't live in some yuppie loft apartment. She had nothing to do with all this. She was innocent."

Beispiel looked up angrily. Something connected there.

"Yeah," Armand said to Washington. "He's gotta feel bad about that." Then, to Beispiel, "She was just a nice old lady and now she's dead. And her husband—" Armand thought about the old man, about Jerry, how at the end of the evening, at the thought of going back home to an empty house, he'd suddenly looked like he was going to cry. "You sick fuck," he said.

Beispiel looked angry now. "I didn't kill the old woman," he said. "That wasn't me. I saw that on TV. I just came down to see."

Washington laughed. "He don't want credit for the one he screwed up," he said.

Beispiel just stared at them, red-faced. "I'm innocent," he said weakly.

That night, Armand dreamt about the car wreck again. He watched the car flip over and over again, saw it come to a rest finally in the snow. In his dream, the radio was playing a song from his youth, Frankie Avalon, a sappy song. And as if he were flying above it, Armand could see the whole landscape, the first couple of cars whizzing past, unaware, then a car stopping, a young couple scrambling from the front seats, running through the snow to the wreck. And later, an ambulance pulling up, lifting Carol so gently and carefully from the collapsed car onto a stretcher. Then, like in the movies, Armand zoomed in on her face, which should have been peaceful, but it wasn't, her mouth open as if in amazement, the black of her mouth, her white teeth. Her front tooth was chipped. Like the old woman's, her tooth was chipped and bloody, and suddenly, in the dream, his wife and the dead old woman were one. The setting had changed, Jerry Farber was standing beside him, weeping. His arm was bandaged. When he looked up, his eyes were cold and dry—

He woke gasping for breath. What had happened? He remembered the tooth and it seemed important to him. He closed his eyes in the dark and recreated the dream image. There was a little blood on it, her blood. He turned on the light.

Was it her blood?

He had a few phone calls to make.

That afternoon, Washington stopped by the house in the Caprice again. "The news," he said, "is Beispiel's copping to the whole thing."

Armand sat silently beside him. "To all five?"

"All five," Washington said, smacking the steering wheel to the music, George Clinton, something like that. "He's gonna talk about all five. Hopes a little cooperation will get him some leniency with the courts. He doesn't want the DP."

Armand thought about it. "You know, Jerry Farber's gonna be a rich man, don't you? He had a big policy on the old lady."

Washington smiled. "Good," he said. "The old man deserves it. Creep killed his wife." He was nodding his head to the music.

"I suppose so."

"What's with you?" Washington said. "We've cleared a big case! The biggest! We get to work, there'll be champagne. Did you see Chief on TV this morning?"

"Missed it," Armand said.

And then he knew exactly how the case would play out. Beispiel might as well cop to all five. Four or five vics, it didn't matter. If he kept it simple, cooperated, he might just get life. If he didn't . . . They wanted him to plead to five, he'd plead to five. Who cares?

Armand thought about Jerry Farber, the bandaged arm, the insurance policy he'd called about that morning, the upside down pictures and cracked glass owl that now, weeks later, looked like a struggle put hastily aright in an otherwise spotless house. It was, none of it, proof. And only Armand had noticed. He'd made no notes, taken no photos, hadn't told Washington. The bite mark beneath the bandage was probably almost healed by now.

They were pulling onto 350 now, past Unity Temple, past Berbiglia Liquors and I-435. When he closed his eyes, Armand could see how the game had played out for Jerry Farber. He'd strangled his wife. For the money? Sure, for the money. And what did it matter? He'd wrapped something around her neck, a rope or a tie, and pulled it tight. But she was stronger than he thought and they tussled, knocking over a few pictures, the glass owl. She bit him on the elbow. Or he elbowed her in the mouth, breaking her tooth in his skin. Armand looked out the window.

And then he'd loaded her into the car—somewhere, her shoes had fallen off—driven her down to the River Market and posed her there, on a quiet bench, the way Beispiel had done the

others. It would look like a screwup, but it was no mistake.

Armand sighed. He'd liked the old man too much. They were passing the Nelson Gallery, the Kemper, approaching the Plaza, then right again down Broadway.

When they'd arrived at his house, Jerry Farber'd probably only had time to clean the place up hastily. He'd put the pictures upside down, replaced the owl with the other animals. Armand remembered he'd been sweating. What else had he missed? He hadn't been looking.

And later the old man had written the letter to the *Star*—he had to write it, but he couldn't match the typewriter or the paper.

Washington had taken them the long way, and now they were approaching Thirteenth Street, the enormous, concrete convention center, the hotels, the Criminal Investigation Bureau.

And a lucky coincidence all around that the media showed up so quickly to cover the murder. Of course, Beispiel, who killed in his own neighborhood, would want to come out and see who was imitating his handiwork. Of course he would. And it was his undoing.

Armand sighed. It was best for everyone—the chief, Beispiel, Armand, Washington—that no one brought Jerry Farber into it. The case looked clean the way it was, and the Department badly needed the press. He smacked the dashboard with his palm.

He was going to confront Farber, he was going to try to put him away. But he already knew he'd lose. The game was rigged now. "Sometimes," he told Washington, "sometimes this job works out to bullshit."

But Washington had no idea what he was talking about. He just sang along to his CD as they drove the last few blocks to their heroes' welcome. 🐦

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TWENTY-FIVE LARGE

JAS. R. PETRIN

"This is how I get beat up," Benny said. "Because I try to be a nice guy."

They were in the Rob Roy on Agricola Street. Benny was sitting at the end of the bar, just where it curved around to meet the wall by the VLT machine. The same place he always sat, so he could see what went on behind the bar, and who came in or out the door to the street. Especially who came in.

"There's a simple solution," Beemer said, picking the bar rag up, sniffing it, and folding it tidily over the edge of the sink: good for a few more wipes. "The solution is, don't be so nice."

"I can't stop myself," Benny said. "It's the kind of guy I am. Somebody comes to me with a hard story, and before I know it, there I am in the middle. No different this time."

"Yeah, but jeez, Harvey Halderson? You can see that guy coming with your eyes closed. You ought to know better."

"I do. I know what they say about him. But he can help you out, you know? And he gives me this story about being a good citizen—me, not him—and before I know it, I'm up there in the North End handing over thick envelopes to rat-faced guys I never saw before. 'Thank you on behalf of the party,' I'm telling them, and that's when the cops come outta the woodwork and arrest us."

"But not Harvey, he doesn't get arrested?"

"Harvey? He's not even there. Besides, he's a party organizer. No chance he'll be arrested. He did pay for my lawyer, though, or at least the taxpaying citizens did, with his assistance."

"Another fat envelope."

"You guessed it. And now he wants it back. Plus the cash I was supposed to hand out that night, which was taken by the cops as evidence."

"How much?"

"Fifteen thousand is what he says was in the envelopes. I have to

take his word for that. And ten thousand for the lawyer. Twenty-five large, the total amount."

"I guess he's anxious to reimburse the taxpayers."

Benny grunted. "Yeah, right. No chance he'd keep it. Use it to pay down that BMW he rolls around in."

"I wouldn't mind one of those," Beemer said, a BMW being his dream car, something he talked about a lot, and how he got the name.

"Then you need to go into politics," Benny said fast, before the bartender could get going on the subject. He glanced around and lowered his voice. "Or come in with me on this deal I got lined up."

"What deal is that?" Beemer said, cocking an eyebrow. "Or should I even ask? Last time I was into something with you, I wound up getting run over and shot, all on the same night."

Benny looked at him, narrowing his eyes. "Your big toe got run over is all, and you didn't get shot, you got shot *at*. There's a difference. And besides, you got paid, didn't you?"

"I think I got, what was it, three hundred dollars? You said I'd get three thousand."

"Excuse me? I said you could get *up to* three thousand, all depending on what the take was. The take was small. You got your share. More than your share, in fact." He sniffed. "Hell, all you did was drive the forklift. And once I replaced that rear window that got shot out, I didn't make nothing. I think I was short a few bucks, as a matter of fact."

"The things you get up to," Beemer said, "you should have bulletproof glass." He walked down to the end of the bar to serve an elderly man wearing red earmuffs, poured him a Coke with lots of ice, then came back and leaned against the wall. "I tell you, it's one of them nights. You'd think if a guy was that cold he'd be drinking hot rum, not soft drinks. No tip there."

"I just gave you a tip," Benny said, "the best tip you're gonna get. You come in with me and drive the forklift, we go halves. You get half of my half."

"That's a quarter, if I remember my math."

"Come on. You get half of what I get. The guy that planned the job, who did all the lead-in work, he gets the rest."

"And how much is that?"

"Fifty thousand. The whole take is one hundred grand."

Beemer didn't say anything for a minute. He kept leaning against the wall. Then he moved to the sink, picked up the rag, swabbed the bar a few times, then replaced the rag over the edge of the sink.

"Say again?"

"One," replied Benny, enunciating carefully. "Hundred. Grand."

"That's what I thought you said. So this other guy would take fifty, you and me would split the rest—"

"No. First I'd have to pay off Harvey, the twenty-five. The other twenty-five, that's what we'd split."

"Oh. So now I'm down to one-eighth."

"Listen, your take would be twelve-five. For driving a forklift. You could forklift the entire stock of nine Wal-Mart stores and not make that kind of dough. And this is cash. No deductions, no taxes, no out of pocket expenses."

His eyes narrowed. "So what's it all about?"

Benny cleared his throat and sat a little closer. "You know anything about pay phones?"

"I know you put a quarter in them, you can make a call."

"That's about what most people know. Did you also know they're nothing short of a gold mine?"

"They only hold a few coins."

"That's what most people think."

"They think that because it's true."

"Sure, but that's just *one phone*. There's thousands of them. On collection day it's big money."

"I'm listening," Beemer said.

"You know the phone company?" Benny said. Beemer waited for it. "Well," Benny said, "this guy I know is going to find one of their collections."

"He's going to find it? They're gonna lose it, but they just don't know it yet?"

"I don't have the details. Anyway, he's going to need some help."

"Before or after he finds it?"

"After."

"So what does he need help for?"

"To move the stuff. Coins are heavy." Benny pointed at the till. "Got a roll of quarters there?" Beemer took a roll of quarters out of the till and set it on the bar. Benny picked it up. Hefted it. "Forty quarters. Ten bucks. What do you think this weighs?"

Beemer took the roll and hefted it a few times himself.

"I dunno. Five, six ounces."

"Close," Benny said. "But you're a little light. One quarter weighs 0.567 grams. Forty of 'em is eight ounces. That adds up fast. It'll take three guys to shift this load the guy's gonna find."

Beemer put the roll back in the till and slammed the drawer shut. "This isn't no armored car robbery you're talking about, is it? 'Cause if it is—"

"You're asking is it Brinks?"

"Brinks or whoever else. Those guys will shoot you."

"Well, it isn't Brinks. It doesn't work that way. How it works is the telco makes its own collections. They sort the coins, roll 'em, enter the proceeds on the books. *Then* Brinks picks up the money and delivers it to the bank."

"Why doesn't Brinks just pick it up from the phones in the first place and take it straight to the bank?"

"That's what I asked. But that won't work. Each phone is just peanuts, sending Brinks around would be too expensive. Besides, the telco has to know how much money they collected, they can't take somebody else's word for it. So they count it first and then make the deposit."

Beemer didn't say anything.

"I know what you're thinking," Benny said. "It's still just a few quarters, right?"

"And dimes. And nickels."

Benny grinned. "That's the good part. This guy is only gonna find the quarters."

"Oh, well then. The big money."

"Listen, you got to look at the wider picture. I don't know how many pay phones the telco has but they're everywhere. Say they got five thousand of them and they average a hundred bucks a collection, each one. That's half a million dollars."

"Okay."

"Cash."

"Sure. But hold on. You said one hundred large."

"For the whole telco, half a million. This is just one route collection."

Beemer thought a minute. He walked down the bar, picked up some coins and the empty Coke glass left there by the old guy, put the glass on the wash rack, and came back to Benny, counting the coins in his hand.

"I was wrong. He tipped me a quarter. Prob'ly decided he won't need a new pair of earmuffs for awhile." He dropped the quarter in a jar by the till, and sorted the rest of the coins into the cash drawer. "So when would you need me?"

"Soon," Benny said. "And we'll need your brother's truck."

"That looks like him," Benny said as they drove in, nodding out the windshield at a three-ton rental parked at the far end of the Tim Hortons lot. Beemer guided the Chevy pickup across the asphalt and into the next slot. As they got out, the driver of the three-ton slid out of the cab and came around the rear of the vehicle.

"Beemer, I want you to meet Metro Schalke," Benny said, lean-

ing his head at the driver, a tall, big-boned guy with a high forehead, a mane of thick dark hair, deep-set eyes, and pale skin that made him look like Bela Lugosi in the role of Dracula.

"Pleasedameetcha," Beemer said.

Metro Schalke said something that sounded like "Biffle!" looked Beemer up and down, and turned back toward the three-ton.

"He don't shake hands, this guy?" Beemer said. They watched Schalke climb back into the cab.

Benny shrugged, explaining in a low voice, "His mother was Romanian, his father was German, he's from Uzbekistan."

"He could be from Planet X," Beemer said. "What he looks like is somebody I saw on a late movie. This guy that sucked the blood out of you and flew around like a bat."

They drove out of the lot together, all crowded into the cab of the three-ton, Dracula at the wheel, Benny in the middle, Beemer looking annoyed with his elbow out the passenger's window.

"This warehouse you mentioned," Beemer said testily, "where is it?"

"Up in Burnside," Benny told him. "Close."

"I'm glad to hear it," Beemer said.

They took the new bridge across the harbor, which at the other end, after the toll booths, led into the Burnside business park area. The warehouse was tucked in deep between an auto impound lot and a ceramic tile company. Hard to see from the road. They drove around to the rear and backed the three-ton up to a loading door.

Dracula had a key to the place. He knew where the alarms were and how to operate them and went right to them and switched them off. The only light came from a small lamp over a desk, the big overhead fluorescents all dark. He pressed a button and the loading door rattled up.

Dracula pointed.

Off to one side of the room, against a wall, stood a white commercial-duty van with the telco logo on the side, its rear doors thrown open. Inside was a mound of black boxes. Each box was about two feet long, a foot high and a foot deep, and each was secured with a heavy padlock. Benny counted twenty of them.

"Bingo," he said, grinning.

Beemer studied the black boxes. "So how," he said, "did they come to be here, all the way from the telephone company, no dimes and no nickels?"

Benny shrugged. "Ask him."

"Mizzle," Schalke told them.

"Oh, well then, that explains it," Beemer said. He rolled his eyes.

Beemer found a forklift somewhere far back in the darkness, an electric one that you drove by standing in a slot at the rear and steering with a small hand-wheel like a crank. It could turn on a dime. He came shooting out of the shadows on it, and in five minutes he had the small black boxes neatly stacked in the back of the three-ton.

Schalke locked up and they left, stopping by the Tim Hortons so that Beemer could pick up his brother's truck. Then Schalke led the way to an address out on Windmill Road, Beemer trailing behind in the pickup. They left the verge of the city lights and arrived at a barn out behind a hill with lots of trees pressing up around.

"Kinda dark here," Beemer said, getting out of the half-ton. "Now what?"

"Now," Benny said, "we divvy up. Load our share into the pickup and we're outta here. You'll have to move the pickup back to back with the three-ton."

"Fine, let's do it," Beemer said, "before Dracula gets hungry."

He repositioned the smaller truck, then followed Benny up into the back of the large one. They took hold of the first of the cash boxes, each gripping one of its large steel handles. They heaved, and the box moved an inch. They both let go of it and stood back a foot.

"Jeez!" said Beemer. "I wondered why the forklift was grunting. Now I know. These things weigh a ton."

"We'll slide 'em," Benny said. "Drag 'em over to the tailgate, then make a dead lift down into the pickup. That'll work." He signaled to Dracula, who climbed up into the box with them.

They all heaved together.

"Merg!" Dracula grunted.

"That's what I say," Beemer told him.

They zigzagged the box to the tailgate, hopped down into the bed of the smaller truck, braced themselves, and lowered it into the pickup. They did the same with nine more boxes, then clambered down out of the truck. Schalke then got into the three-ton and drove off without another word.

"Nice guy," Beemer said.

Beemer turned back to the pickup, stiffened, and backed up a few paces. "Jeez!"

"What?" Benny said.

"Look at the truck."

They looked at it. It was sagging alarmingly at the rear.

"This truck is rated for a fifteen-hunnerd pound payload," Beemer said. "Gotta be almost twice that in those boxes. I never knew quarters weighed so much."

"Well, I guess they have to weigh something. Just take it nice and easy over the rough spots, and it's gonna be just fine."

"Now, wait a minute, boys, wait just a minute here." Harvey Halderson eased his rotund body forward. He wore his usual red tie, the party color. The neon lights of the dance club sign above them came and went on his face—blue and white, blue and white. His jaw was set in a tight grin, gazing into the back of the truck. "I don't know about this. I know I said cash, Benny, but I meant folding money. Twenties. Hundreds. What am I going to do with this?"

"Same thing I'd do with it, I guess," Benny said. "Buy lots of soft drinks, newspapers, go to the laundry every day."

"No, no, Benny. Change it to paper. Then come around and see me."

"How am I gonna do that? Change it?"

"Well, I don't know, Benny. You'll find a way, I'm sure."

"Take the money. Coin of the realm."

"Can't do that, Benny."

"I owe you the money, I brought it to you."

"Sure, but not coins, Benny. Paper money. Jeez."

Benny stepped in closer. "Look, you are the guy who sent me up to the North End in the first place. You are the guy who got me the lawyer. You are the guy who put me onto Schalke when I said I might have trouble coming up with the scratch."

Harvey Halderson forced his grin a little more. A man of logic and reason, tolerance and patience.

"But I didn't know, did I, that he was talking about coins? He's a hard guy to understand sometimes. I'm sorry, Benny. I can't use this."

Harvey locked his car with his remote, then minced off into the side door of the club, shaking his head.

Benny stood there. He looked at the trunk lock. He looked at Beemer.

"Got a car-popper on you?"

Beemer scoured his pockets, came up with a stubby ratchet handle and a socket with a short, flat screwdriver bit. He pushed the screwdriver bit into the key slot, and gave a quick hard crank on the ratchet. There was a loud snap. He pulled the bit away and the lock came with it, cylinder and all. Benny threw the trunk lid up.

"Back the truck in here and let's get him loaded. And make sure we don't give him one lousy quarter too much."

They'd already decided each box had about five thousand dollars in it. Beemer figured it out, being good with money. They dragged a box out onto the tailgate and snapped the hasp off with

Harvey's tire iron. The coins were loose inside, not rolled. They tilted the box outward and let the coins spill into the trunk of the BMW. They did this five times. The trunk was completely filled.

"Okay," Benny said, slamming the trunk lid down, "good enough." Beemer slid the broken lock cylinder back into its barrel with his thumb.

They closed the tailgate of the truck and pulled out of the lot. As they drove off, Benny used Beemer's untraceable tumbler phone to place a call to the cops.

Next day, back at the Rob Roy, Beemer pushed himself away from the wall, and said, "Oh dear. Here comes trouble."

From where he was sitting, Benny could see Harvey Halderson striding in the front door, coat billowing behind him, his face as red as his tie. He spotted Benny right off, and came steaming down along the bar to where Benny was sitting. He seemed to be having trouble breathing.

"You! . . . You! . . ."

"What!" Benny said innocently. He said to Beemer, "Better bring Harvey a scotch, Beem. He don't look good. He needs a pick-me-up, I think."

"I'll give you a pick-me-up!" Harvey Halderson said. Tiny drops of saliva quivered on his lips. "What did you think you were doing, dumping all that . . . that—" He glanced around to see who might be listening. "—that *crap* in my trunk? I told you—!"

"I know what you told me," Benny said calmly. "I figured you just didn't think it would fit in your car, you with a smaller vehicle. Your trunk lock was broken, so I thought I'd see if it would fit. It did. So I left it there." Benny shrugged. "Now we're square."

"The lock was *not* broken. You forced it. And do you know what that damn stuff weighs? My back bumper was dragging on the ground. You broke a spring!"

"No," Benny said, "I was very gentle. It must have been already broke."

Beemer put the scotch on the bar. Harvey Halderson glanced at it, blinked, snatched it up, and drained it. He banged the glass back down.

"And do you know what else? The cops showed up and accused *me*—" His eyes bulged. "—of robbing parking meters!"

Benny laughed. "Well, they can't prove nothing."

"They wanted to know where I got so many quarters."

"Tell them it's none of their business. A guy pays you in quarters for something, you get quarters, that's all. Coin of the realm."

"It isn't that easy!"

"You want a good lawyer? I can recommend one."

"I've got an excellent lawyer."

"Yeah, but he's awful expensive."

Harvey Halderson stood staring at Benny for several long seconds, trembling.

"I know what this is about," he said. "I know what this is about!" He leveled his finger. "Tough guy! Okay! But you don't get no more jobs from me!"

Harvey Halderson turned and stalked back along the bar to the door and out.

"I don't think he likes you anymore," Beemer said. He lifted an eyebrow. "Who's gonna pay for the scotch?"

"My treat," Benny said. He reached into his pocket. "How many quarters is that?"



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THE CASE OF THE UNREPENTANT GHOST

LLOYD BIGGLE, JR.

Few people have the unsettling experience of finding a Chief Inspector of the Metropolitan Police on the doorstep before they finish breakfast. Lady Sara Varnley, who was Britain's finest detective, had it happen frequently at her residence in Connaught Mews, and she tolerated it without complaint. For one thing, Chief Inspector Mewer was an old friend who occasionally made himself useful. For another, the mysteries he brought to her were sometimes perplexing enough to be interesting.

The Chief Inspector's yank on the bell pull was unmistakable. Rick Allwar, one of Lady Sara's footmen, answered it and then came to inform us that the Chief Inspector and another gentleman had declined an offer of breakfast and were waiting for her in her study.

Lady Sara arched her eyebrows. "Another gentleman?"

"A small gentleman in plain-clothes. He doesn't look like a policeman."

"What does he look like?" Lady Sara asked.

"He might be something or other in the City, but it is difficult to say. He has had an unsettling experience, and he feels certain that he didn't deserve it."

Lady Sara laughed. "Very well. Tell them I'll be down shortly."

The other gentleman's stature and slight build certainly appeared small when compared with the Chief Inspector's massive bulk, but I had the impression that he was far more accustomed to giving orders than to taking them. His name was Vincent Uppington, and his card, which he presented to Lady Sara when the Chief Inspector introduced him, listed an impressive home address in St. John's Wood and a business address on Threadneedle Street, the latter suggesting that whatever



he did in the City was important.

Both gentlemen contrasted oddly with Lady Sara, who wore her hair plainly, dressed plainly, and never stood out in a crowd, though many men thought her beautiful. It was only when she began to talk that people became aware of a remarkable presence.

Lady Sara introduced me as Colin Quick, her assistant. She got us seated around the large conference table in the centre of the room and paused for a moment to study Uppington's card. "Twelve Maxton Place," she murmured. "I believe I know that neighbourhood. It is a semidetached house, is it not? Red brick construction. Both it and its companion are unusually large houses even for that neighbourhood, with extensive grounds that are surrounded by an iron-railed fence."

Mr. Uppington was startled to find so much known about him in advance, and he fell silent.

The Chief Inspector prompted him. "It would be best for you to tell Lady Sara exactly what happened."

"Very well," Uppington said, "though it's not likely to be any more believable now than it was last night. My wife and I enjoy entertaining. We have a large party at least once a month. Not a dinner party, those are bores, but a congenial gathering of friends, with a buffet table and music for dancing after everyone has eaten.

"Last night's party proceeded as our parties always have proceeded, people enjoying the food and each other, lively talk, lots of laughter. I gauge the success of my parties by the laughter. A party where everyone stands around looking glum is a total failure."

Lady Sara, who gauged a party's success by the amount of serious talk it generated, gave him an encouraging nod. The Chief Inspector was looking on restlessly. This was not his idea of how to make a report. Uppington had spoken half a dozen sentences and still hadn't gotten to the point.

"So—the party was going well," Uppington continued. "Most of the guests had finished eating, and the musicians had arrived and were tuning their instruments in a nearby room. Afterwards, several of my guests thought they had noticed a stranger among us, but I hadn't and my wife hadn't, and none of my servants saw him. He could have slipped in through the front door when the servants were busy elsewhere, of course, and with so many people present—the guest list totalled more than thirty, and there were the musicians, and the servants, and several servants who were strangers to us whom we engaged for the party—probably no one, including myself, knew everyone present by sight.

"But no one mentioned there being a stranger present, no reason why anyone should, until suddenly we all took notice of him.

Our salon has a magnificent fireplace, and over it hangs a large portrait, an oil painting, quite well done, of an elderly gentleman with a long, white beard. It is a portrait of the grandfather of my landlord, who occupies the premises next door. It hung there when his father was the occupant, and he had a sentimental desire that it should remain there. I had no objection. As I said, it is a well-done painting of a distinguished-looking gentleman, so I agreed to keep the portrait there and care for it.

"When I first noticed the stranger, he was standing in front of the fireplace facing my guests, most of whom were at the other end of the room. He had the same long, white beard as the man in the portrait, his face looked exactly the same except for a sort of ghostly gleam about it, he was dressed exactly the same way, and he had struck precisely the same pose as that of the man in the painting—like this." Uppington got to his feet and raised one hand, index finger extended.

"The room gradually fell silent as more and more of my guests left off what they were doing to stare at the tableau that had suddenly arranged itself before us. And it *was* a striking tableau, with that silent figure exactly resembling the painting that hung behind and above him. Then the figure began to be enveloped by a haze that turned out to be smoke. As the smoke became thicker, the figure became dimmer and dimmer until it vanished in a sudden puff of smoke that completely obliterated it.

"At first, there was concern about fire, but the braver of my guests ventured into the smoke, emerged coughing, and said there seemed to be nothing there but smoke. Both guests and servants began opening windows and trying to do something about the smoke. As visibility improved in the room, we became aware that someone was lying on the floor where the smoke had been the thickest. It was a man, and one of my guests, a doctor, examined him and informed us that he was quite dead. He had been stabbed in the back by something like an ice pick, which was left in the wound. At that point, I called the police."

Lady Sara turned to Chief Inspector Mewer. "Have you identified the victim?"

"Not yet," the Chief Inspector said. "No one at the party knew him, and we haven't had much time for a wider search. He isn't listed as a missing person."

"Did he bear any resemblance to the man who struck a pose in front of the portrait?" Lady Sara asked.

Mr. Uppington and the Chief Inspector shook their heads simultaneously.

"And the man who struck the pose vanished completely?"

This time they both nodded.

"Does everyone who was present agree that there was no body on the floor when you first saw the man posed in front of the portrait?"

"Absolutely," Mr. Uppington said. "I mean, there were about forty people staring at that end of the room. Certainly some of them would have seen the body if it'd been there."

"How long had the victim been dead?"

"No more than a few minutes when the doctor examined him," the Chief Inspector said. "The body was still warm."

"Is there any possibility that the wound could have been self-inflicted?"

"Absolutely none. Not even a contortionist could have stabbed himself in the centre of his back."

Lady Sara reflected for a moment. "This is what we have, then—a stranger somehow got into Mr. Uppington's party, struck a pose in front of a portrait whose subject resembled him, and then vanished in a cloud of smoke. When the smoke cleared, no evidence of him remained, but another stranger lay murdered on the floor, correct?"

Again, both Uppington and the Chief Inspector nodded.

"Of course you searched meticulously for an explanation of the first stranger's miraculous disappearance."

"Meticulously," the Chief Inspector agreed. He liked the word. He said it again, "Meticulously. There are no secret panels or trap doors in that room."

"What do you make of it?" Lady Sara asked the Chief Inspector.

He responded with a loud harrumph. "In my time," he announced, "I have encountered numerous tales of haunts. The tales never make sense. There are always as many descriptions as there are witnesses. If the ghost was a man, one witness saw him in a bowler, another in a topper, and a third swears he was hatless. One describes him as hatchet-faced, another as pie-faced, and a third as hollow-cheeked. His head was bald, or slightly bald, or he had a shaggy head of hair. He had a full beard, or a square-cut beard, or he was clean-shaven. He wore a craftsman's smock, or a business suit, or an evening dress. Mind you, all of those descriptions purport to describe the same illusion. If the ghost was female, it's far worse. No two people ever see a ghost the same way. This case is different. When you have forty people who saw a man posed in front of a painting and each of them is able to describe him in considerable detail, and all of the descriptions are pretty much alike, I refuse to call him a ghost."

"How are you proceeding?" Lady Sara asked.

"We are following our usual routine," the Chief Inspector said stiffly.

"What about the occupant of the house next door?"

"We have already interviewed him. His bedroom is at the far side of his house, and he heard nothing until we rang his bell. He couldn't tell us anything, and when we took him to see the dead man, he couldn't identify him."

Lady Sara turned her attention to Vincent Uppington. "Have you had any problems with your neighbour and landlord?"

"None," Uppington said. "Actually, we have had very few contacts. He seems to be something of a recluse. I wouldn't call him friendly, but he is always courteous."

"Has he ever complained about these large parties of yours?"

"Certainly not. I asked him several times whether they bothered him, and he pointed out each time that his bedroom is on the far side of his house and no amount of riot in our salon would be likely to disturb him."

"Had you been bothered by ghosts before this materialization last night?"

"Not at all," Uppington said. He hesitated for a moment and then continued. "When we signed the lease, the estate agent told us the house was haunted, and there had been complaints from earlier tenants. He thought it odd because the house is relatively new. It is usually a venerable building or one that was the site of some deep tragedy that attracts ghosts. He didn't seem to take the subject seriously, so we certainly didn't—until last night."

"In case you have any misgivings about continuing to reside there, I have good news for you. I feel confident that this particular ghost won't be seen again."

"How can you know that?" the Chief Inspector demanded.

Lady Sara smiled. "As you surely are aware, detectives, like magicians, are reluctant to reveal the tricks of their trade. I want to assure Mr. Uppington that there will be no uninvited guests at his next party—at least, none of the spirit variety. There may be a few crashers who are hoping for a repetition of last night's excitement, and he would be well advised to plan for them. The dead man poses an entirely different set of problems: Who is he, how did he get there, why did he arrive at that particular moment, and who wanted him dead?"

The Chief Inspector nodded. "All of that. Do you have any suggestions?"

"Not at the moment. There are one or two aspects of the case that I'll have to look into first. If you succeed in identifying him, please let me know at once."

"I know you will want to inspect the premises. I have already informed Mrs. Uppington that you or one of your assistants will be calling."

"Perhaps later," Lady Sara said. "The first thing I must attend to is the rumour about the house being haunted."

After the Chief Inspector and Mr. Uppington left, Lady Sara turned to me and asked, "What do you think?"

"I'm with the Chief Inspector," I said. "I don't believe the man was a ghost."

"Neither do I. On the other hand, his conduct was rather more appropriate for a ghost than for a murderer. What manner of murderer is it who will attract attention to himself in the most dramatic way possible and then, when the eyes of everyone in the room are fixed on him, produce a cloud of smoke and use it as a screen to commit murder?"

"I would consider it unlikely behaviour even for a ghost."

She shook her head. "There is no mystery at all about the ghost. The real mystery is how the murder victim got into the room since he wasn't there when the ghost was first noticed. I'm considering the timing of the thing. The 'ghost' struck his pose in front of the fireplace; then when he had everyone's attention, smoke began to envelop him. At that point, did the ghost dash out to get the body from somewhere, bring it back into the room, arrange it on the carpet, and then make his own escape?"

"It is more likely that the victim joined the ghost voluntarily as soon as the smoke was thick enough to conceal him."

"Meaning that the victim obligingly made himself available to the murderer at the precise moment the murderer was ready for him? Perhaps," she mused. "Perhaps. It is also possible that a third party was involved. I'll remind you that none of this takes into consideration the Chief Inspector's certainty that there are no secret panels in that room. The mechanism of the crime—*how* it was done—seems baffling, but it is all we have to contemplate until the victim is identified. *Why* it was done, and why the murderer chose that particular time and place, must wait."

"So what do we do first?" I asked.

"The only logical place to begin is by interviewing the ghost," she said.

Maxton Place was a pleasantly wooded area populated with homes that would have looked palatial anywhere else. Here the emphasis was on the comfort of the residents rather than on vulgar portentousness, and the dwellings were fitted discreetly into the wooded landscape. Numbers 12 and 14 were, as Lady Sara had

said, large even for this neighbourhood. Number 12 already had several callers, perhaps friends come to console Mrs. Uppington on the catastrophe that disrupted her party and, incidentally, hear the details firsthand. Their carriages and coachmen were waiting. We drove past number 12, turned in at number 14—the gate stood open—and followed a circular drive to the entrance.

The house itself—vast, solidly conservative—was evidence enough that the occupant possessed considerable wealth.

"It is an unlikely address for a ghost," I observed.

"It is also an unlikely address for a murder," Lady Sara said. "One would almost expect a clause in Mr. Uppington's lease prohibiting either."

Lady Sara rarely used her carriage, but on this day she had, with Old John Quick, her coachman and my foster father, driving. Like the excellent detective she was, she always managed to fit unobtrusively into whatever setting her work took her to, and a mere four-wheeler or trap would have looked ridiculously out of place at that address.

The footman was young, in his mid twenties, and he answered the bell with an energetic promptness. Lady Sara presented her card and informed him that she and her secretary were calling on Mr. Cecil Radcliffe. The footman bowed and led us up a long stairway to a first floor drawing room. There he invited us to make ourselves comfortable; Mr. Radcliffe would join us shortly.

The room—indeed, the whole house—had a dusty, disused air. I asked Lady Sara, "Does someone actually live here?"

"Mr. Radcliffe is a bachelor," she said. "I haven't seen him for at least fifteen years. He was something of a recluse even then. Unlike Mr. Uppington, he probably does no entertaining at all."

Glancing about the room, my gaze settled on something startling: a large, painted portrait showing an elderly man with a long, white beard and suspiciously black hair. He was standing in a striking pose, hand raised, one finger elevated.

"Since Mr. Radcliffe insists that a tenant keep his grandfather's likeness prominently displayed, it shouldn't be surprising that a similar painting hangs in his own home," Lady Sara said.

Mr. Cecil Radcliffe entered the room so quietly that he seemed almost ghostlike himself. He had the air and appearance of a man who rarely entertained visitors before noon, and it perfectly suited his aristocratic manner. He was of medium height but looked taller because of his slender frame. He was clean-shaven when he bothered to shave, but on that day he hadn't. Neither had he got around to combing his thick head of greying hair. His elaborate dressing gown had an Oriental look to it that severely clashed

with the sedate surroundings. I would have guessed his age as anywhere between fifty and seventy.

Lady Sara and I rose when we became aware of his presence. He came close enough to us to touch my hand when Lady Sara introduced me. Then, inviting us to sit down again, he arranged himself in an elaborate imported bentwood rocking chair of a type that had been the rage in England fifty years before. It suddenly dawned on me that the whole house was fifty years out of date. So was Mr. Cecil Radcliffe.

"Oh dear," he said with a sigh.

Lady Sara wagged her finger at him. "Naughty, naughty," she said in a matter-of-fact way.

He shook his head. "No. Stupid, stupid."

"We heard Mr. Uppington's version earlier this morning," Lady Sara said.

"Did you?"

"And now we would like to hear yours. But before you begin, my assistant should know the background." She turned to me. "Semidetached houses like these are normally separated by a party wall, a wall common to both dwellings. That is the case with the upper stories of these two residences. With the lower stories, for reasons now long forgotten, the dwellings were separated by two walls with a dead space of about a yard between them."

"It may have been conceived of as a noise barrier," Mr. Radcliffe said. "I know of two other dwellings designed by the same architect that have a similar barrier, though, with less space separating the walls. One is in Mayfair and the other in Lambeth."

"But neither of those residences has displayed such a spectacular tendency for attracting ghosts," Lady Sara said pointedly. Mr. Radcliffe subsided.

"Fifteen years ago," Lady Sara continued, "the residence next door became severely troubled by ghosts. Several tenants complained about them. They were discreet ghosts, materializing only for a short time and then vanishing in a haze of something that smelled remarkably like smoke. They rarely appeared to more than one or two people at a time and then only to people who were some distance away. Despite that, the tenants were severely troubled by them. The smoke tended to linger, and sometimes the house had to be fumigated. One tenant had a priest in to perform an exorcism ceremony. At least two tenants that I know of gave up their leases—though I must say Mr. Radcliffe was most considerate and refused to impose the financial penalties that the law would have allowed him. Finally, a tenant with a more practical turn of mind decided there was nothing ghostlike about an apparition."

tion that left so much genuine smoke, and he called in a detective—me. And instead of running in alarm when the ghost appeared, I watched it carefully and detected the secret panel trick.

"Whereupon I called Mr. Radcliffe to account and obtained his solemn promise—"

"Oh dear," Mr. Radcliffe moaned.

"—solemn promise that in return for my keeping my discovery confidential, the ghosts would be laid to rest permanently. I should add that Mr. Radcliffe was an amateur actor of some distinction in his youth, and he still associates himself with an occasional theatrical production. He is, in fact, a dabbler—his wealth relieved him of the burden of pursuing a profession, so he has dabbled in a great many things other than the theatre. Chemistry, certainly. Probably carpentry and cabinet making. The panels are most ingeniously contrived."

"Oh dear," Mr. Radcliffe moaned again.

"All of this was fifteen years ago. Though Mr. Radcliffe gave me his solemn promise, for some reason he has yielded to temptation and permitted the ghost to reappear. This time it isn't merely a question of distressing and alarming a neighbour. Somewhere, somehow, he has bungled badly, and he is in far deeper trouble than he is aware of."

"Oh dear," Mr. Radcliffe moaned.

"We will take that as read," Lady Sara said. "Now let's hear your story."

"Oh dear. Did you say you knew Vincent Uppington?"

"I said I had met him."

"Not the same thing." Mr. Radcliffe shook his head gloomily.

"Not the same thing at all. He is such a stuffed shirt—a stuffed shirt with nothing of substance to stuff it with, which is the worst kind. Piously stopping by to make certain his parties weren't bothering me. It never occurred to him to invite me to one." He suddenly laughed resoundingly. "But I attended them anyway! I attended all of them!"

"You didn't!" Lady Sara exclaimed.

"But I did. Only the large ones, of course. It was a simple matter to disguise myself in an anonymous way. I would slip in when the way was clear, drift about, sample the food, quickly find out that the affair was as boring as I expected it to be, and make my exit when an opportunity came."

"No ghost, no smoke?" Lady Sara demanded.

"None. I simply attended the parties as an uninvited guest, and with so many people about, no one knew everyone, so no one

noticed. I assure you—I kept myself completely inconspicuous except for one thing. My manners are impeccable, I can't help that, it's a matter of upbringing, and those of most of Uppington's guests aren't.

"And then, one day when I was shaving—I still prefer to shave myself—I chanced to raise my hand in a way somewhat similar to the pose my grandfather assumes in that portrait." He nodded at the painting we had already noticed. "I saw, to my amazement, that in my old age I had become very similar to my grandfather in appearance. Having made that discovery, I simply had to make use of it. All of the ghosting props I used in my haunting days were disposed of years ago, so I had to acquire new ones. I lavished a great deal of time and expense planning what was to be my last—and most momentous—appearance."

"It certainly was momentous," Lady Sara said dryly.

"Perhaps I should describe my props. My shoes are made to order to my own design. Making them is a ticklish business—the first two pairs didn't work properly, and it wasn't until the third that I successfully produced the smoke I had to have. When I rocked back on my heels, they generated the smoke, which issued through vents in the heels and soles. Just in case I might have to disguise myself further either before or after my prank, I had a frock coat made to match the one in my grandfather's portraits, but my coat is reversible. I can quickly turn it inside out and it becomes a very different garment—blue rather than black and a different style of coat entirely, with just a suggestion of the threadbare and old fashioned about it. For the final touches, I carefully selected a white beard and a black wig that would match my grandfather's. His beard was his own, but he wore that black wig all his life, even after his beard turned white. I should add that the firm that custom-made my props is well aware of my theatrical interests. Its employees thought I was ordering stage props.

"I waited for an unusually large party—the great performance I planned deserved a large audience—and when one finally arrived, I joined the crowd through one of two concealed panels, this one at the back of the room. Wearing my special clothing and the smoke-generating shoes, I circulated among the guests for a short time and then drifted away unnoticed to the fireplace where the painting of my grandfather is displayed. I stood with my back to the other guests as though admiring the painting—though I was confident that no one was paying the slightest attention to me—and I quickly donned the false beard and the wig and applied makeup to lend a ghostly aspect to my face. Then I turned and struck my grandfather's pose. When I had everyone's attention, I

tripped the smoke mechanism. My plan was to slip away when the smoke was thick enough to conceal me and make my escape through the concealed panel near the fireplace. I had checked in advance to make certain it wasn't fastened.

"When I turned towards the fireplace, I tripped over something I knew hadn't been there when I arrived at the end of the room. I had not time to investigate, the smoke might begin to thin at any moment. I reached the panel—and it was fastened. This was an unexpected crisis, but my props allowed for it. I removed the beard and wig, wiped the makeup from my face, turned my coat inside out so that it became different in both style and colour, and edged my way along the side of the room through smoke, exchanging comments with any guests I encountered. Just outside the salon a maid was standing near the second panel. I sent her into the room to help fan the smoke through windows that by that time had been opened, and the moment she was gone, I slipped through the panel and secured it. My shoes were still smoking a little bit, not badly. I reached my bedroom safely—I had my own servants to worry about as well as Uppington's—returned my props to their hiding place, and went to bed. I thought my prank had come off perfectly, and I congratulated myself on a superb performance. Even when the police woke me to find out whether I could identify that body, I failed to connect it with the object I had stumbled over, but I did so the first thing this morning when my housekeeper got a full report from one of Uppington's maids.

"And that, I swear, is the whole story. I never saw the dead man before."

"Did anyone else know about these ghostly adventures of yours?" Lady Sara asked.

"I'm sure no one did. I never mentioned them to a soul."

"Their history covers a considerable time span—from those earlier instances fifteen to twenty years ago to the present. This is extremely important. Are you quite certain that in all those years you never mentioned them to anyone?"

"I'm positive. I'm a self-sufficient kind of person, and I don't need to brag to others about my exploits."

When we rose to leave, Lady Sara warned him, "I may have more questions. The police certainly will. This case appears to be much too complicated for them."

We drove to the City to the office of Radcliffe's estate agent. Lady Sara left me in the carriage while she called on him.

"You'll be an unnecessary distraction," she said. "I know the man, and he may consider it a violation of trust to give me the information I want. I'll have to exercise my feminine wiles."

Her visit was a long one, but she emerged smiling. "Now we can go to work," she said.

On our return home, she called a conference with her two footmen, Rick Alward and Charles Tupper—both of them highly competent investigators—and me. She first described the case.

"This may seem like a random shot at a venture," she said, "but if we wait for the victim to be identified, it may be weeks before anyone misses him. We can proceed without knowing who he is because of one fact we know for certain about the murderer. He had to be familiar with Cecil Radcliffe's secret panels and his ghostly hobby. Radcliffe swears he has never told anyone about them, but he could have forgotten, or someone could have come across the information some other way. I think our most likely suspect is a former tenant because no one else could have had access to the house for the leisurely examination such a discovery would require. I have here a list of nine former tenants going back more than twenty years. I'll give each of you three names. At this stage of the investigation, I want to know only one thing: Where was each one last night? When I have answers for all nine, we will be able to proceed."

The majority of the tenants had continued to use the same estate agent after they left Maxton Place, and the agent had been able to supply one or sometimes several subsequent addresses for them. I was able to deal easily with the first two names on my list. One was an elderly gentleman who had the previous year moved to a warmer climate because of his health. The woman who sublet his house informed me that he now lived at Torquay, in the southwest of England, and she kindly let me copy his address from a calling card he had sent to her.

The second former tenant was exceptionally well qualified for participation in a ghostly prank, since he was dead, but both Lady Sara and the Chief Inspector would have questioned his eligibility as a suspect.

The third posed problems. His name was Langley Halstead, and he was a solicitor residing at 24 Larkly Road. One glance at the house revealed that he was not a successful solicitor. It was in a row of houses of the type referred to as a terrace, but it was a mean neighbourhood, and they were mean houses. After being driven past the address several times in a four-wheeler, I decided that this particular gambit required special preparation.

I called on an elderly woman shopkeeper for whom I had done favours in the past and took some of her stock on consignment. She offered a startling variety of knickknacks and cheap jewellery, and she helped me to make a selection. I was about to become a

peddler, a humble but respectable calling, and for the remainder of the day, my milieu would centre on the back doors and, hopefully, kitchens, of the row of houses on Larkly Road where Langley Halstead resided.

I dressed for the part in clothing that was shabby but not actually disreputable. Otherwise, my props were a wicker tray with a lid and cheap baize lining, the stock of trinkets and knickknacks my friend had lent to me, a limp that I had perfected through long practice, a cap that had seen much wear, and a barely visible smudge on my face.

I had a considerable advantage over most peddlers: Money was of no concern to me. I could offer spectacular bargains that were likely to put the customer in a cheerful mood and encourage talk and confidence.

Back I went to Larkly Road, and this time I inspected the back gardens and doors of residences. There were two well-cultivated gardens, but most of the rear vistas were even more unattractive than the front ones had been. The men residing in houses of this sort usually were something not too important in the City; their energies were sapped by their long day's work and the turmoil of the twice-daily commuter trains. The wives exhausted themselves practicing gentility. There was no place in the budget for a gardener.

I called at the Halstead rear door after visiting several houses on either side, where I disposed of two necklaces, a ring, and eight brooches, and collected a full measure of gossip about Langley Halstead.

Residents of Larkly Road rarely had more than two servants, a maid and a plain cook, with one of them doubling as housekeeper, but most of these homes made do with only one. According to the servants employed by Halstead's neighbours, he was a bachelor with a shoddy reputation. He never paid his bills. Since he was a solicitor, he had to be earning *some* money, but he certainly never spent any, not locally. And he did with only one servant, name of Effie, whom all of the neighbours' servants felt sorry for.

Despite his miserly ways on Larkly Road, he had plenty of money for frolicking elsewhere. He frequently went out in the evening, dressed fit to kill and riding in a cab. I asked whether he had gone out the previous evening. No one had noticed.

My knock on the Halstead rear door was answered by Effie herself, a tall, thin, homely young woman of about twenty-five. She was entranced by my display of baubles, and after trying unsuccessfully to make up her mind, she invited me in for tea so she could take some time to decide.

I was surfeited with tea and teacake by then, but this was the

price one paid for information. I pretended to sip tea enthusiastically and paid her compliments on the cake—actually, it was stale and overly sweet—which she had made herself. She placed my tray near the window, so the sunlight would strike the glass beads and baubles, and for a time she agonized over a choice between a blue brooch and a red one.

I opined that either would look lovely on her, and I offered her an irresistible discount on a second brooch if she bought the first. That taken care of, she was pleased to have someone to talk with, and she described the workings of the household while I continued to simulate tea drinking.

According to Effie, Halstead was even more miserly than the neighbouring servants thought. Whenever she threatened to quit, he would raise her salary, but he often failed to pay her. He was always gadding about.

"Where does he go?" I asked.

"To plays or to the opera. Sometimes he's away for two or three days to see plays in Paree or Oxford."

"My word, that must cost money," I said.

She snorted. "'E's got no money. That's what 'e always says. Can't pay 'is bills. Tradesmen pestering me all the time, threatening to cut 'im off. But 'e's got money for plays."

"Does he go to plays every night?"

"Noooo. 'E couldn't beg or borrow enough money for that."

"What about last night?"

"'E went to a play. Went directly from work so 'e wasn't 'ome for supper. Out late too, as usual after a play. That's when 'e meets 'is club."

"What club is that?"

"The Two 'Undred. 'E's always talking about 'em. They meets after the play at some restaurant and talks about all the mistakes the actors made."

That was as much as I could get.

I returned the unsold stock to my friendly shopkeeper, paid her, and went back to Connaught Mews, where I told Lady Sara, "If Halstead went to a play and then joined the Two Hundred afterwards, he has an alibi, but either proving it or disproving it may be difficult."

"Other members of his club should be able to help us, but I've never heard of the Two Hundred. Have you?"

"No."

"Then we'll have to find someone who has," she said.

She sent a telegram to Max Beerbohm, an old friend who was dramatic critic of *The Saturday Review* and knew everyone and

everything connected with London's theatrical scene. He dropped by that evening on his way to the theatre—impeccably dressed, sprightly in manner, exuding the air of a man who loves his work and is about to enjoy doing it. This was a false front. He hated his work, and Thursday, the day of the deadline for his weekly article, was a day of torment for him.

He had never heard of the Two Hundred, but he promised to enquire about it.

"If you can turn up the names and addresses of one or two members, that would be most helpful," Lady Sara told him.

In the meantime, Rick and Charles were exploring their lists of former tenants at 12 Maxton Place. They returned home to report three negatives each. If Langley Halstead really had gone to the theatre, Lady Sara's random shot at a venture was a complete miss.

The following day the police were no closer to the identification of the murdered man than they had been in the beginning. Charles, Rick, and I did the only thing we could do to avoid doing nothing at all. We performed a thorough investigation of Langley Halstead just in case he hadn't been at the theatre.

He was indeed a spectacularly unsuccessful solicitor. He seemed to have no interests beyond the theatre and opera. There was no woman in his life except Effie, his maid/cook/housekeeper, who despised him. Charles turned up the only reference we found to a relative, a cousin who spent his summer somewhere in the Lake District. Halstead had once mentioned to an acquaintance, an estate agent whose office was in the same building as his, that his cousin was about to visit him.

On the strength of that, Lady Sara sent Charles off to the Lake District at once to see what he could turn up there, which was an even longer shot at a venture. The Lake District was more heavily populated in summer than in winter, but that population was spread over an impressively large mountainous area. It seemed rather early in the investigation for such a desperate measure, especially when we were far from exhausting possibilities in London.

Late that afternoon, Max Beerbohm told us all we needed to know about the Two Hundred. It was an informal group of theatrical enthusiasts who attended as many plays as possible and met after the performances in the beer salon in the basement of the Monica—the restaurant at 19 Shaftesbury Avenue, entrance in Piccadilly Circus—to discuss them. There actually were about a hundred and fifty members, but the membership was constantly in a state of flux. Some members of the group were certain to be at one or the other of London's theatres whenever there was a

performance, and twenty or thirty would gather at the Monica afterwards.

Max had managed to secure names and addresses of two of the members.

"We must see at least one of them immediately," Lady Sara said.

I drew the name of Edward Fallowby, who lived on Half Moon Street. I went in the four-wheeler, with Old John driving, and had the good luck to find him at home.

He was an elderly gentleman and the third son of an Earl, but he had spent his life trying successfully not to look the part. He lived a Bohemian existence in rather shabby rooms, and his limited income barely stretched enough to cover his many interests. He painted pictures, wrote plays and poetry, and played the violin, all without noticeable success. He went to plays as often as the miserly allowance given him by his brother the Earl allowed.

I learned all that and more on our way back to Connaught Mews. He was immensely flattered that Lady Sara, whom he knew by reputation, wanted to see him.

When she got him settled comfortably, she came to the point at once. "One of the members of the Two Hundred is Langley Halstead. Do you know him?"

"Tolerably well," Fallowby murmured. "Tolerably well. I usually see him once or twice a week. He is on an even more restricted budget than I am, but we both are devoted to the theatre."

"So I have heard," Lady Sara said. "I'm going to tell you something in strict confidence. Can I rely on you?"

"Of course," Fallowby said.

"Your friend Langley Halstead is suspected of a serious crime. He may be completely innocent. We don't want to trouble him on the basis of mere suspicions, which may be groundless, and we don't want word of this investigation rumoured around and damaging his reputation. We are attempting to prove his innocence. Our information indicates that he went to the theatre last night and joined the Two Hundred afterwards at the Monica. If he did both, he is not guilty of the crime, and the police can look elsewhere. Can you help us?"

Fallowby took a moment to meditate. "He did join the Two Hundred after the play. There were perhaps twenty-five of us there, and we had attended four or five plays between us. He had seen Beerbohm Tree's production of *The Woman Who Won*, which is a new play, it opened only last Thursday, and our members are already making book on when it will close. It is not a success. We spent the best part of two hours discussing plays—that one and the others we had seen."

"But was Langley Halstead actually at the theatre?" Lady Sara persisted.

"He said he was. He talked at length about the play."

"From his talk, would you judge that he had actually seen the play?"

Fallowby took a moment to reflect. "Yes, I would. I would say that he certainly had seen it. He was both perceptive and articulate about it. No one who hadn't seen it could have talked about it the way he did."

"Thank you," Lady Sara said. "That is important evidence, but it would clinch the matter if someone saw him there. Would it be possible to find out whether anyone did?"

"It would be possible to try," Fallowby said. "But unless he went to the theatre with another member, it's chancy."

Rick and I sat up late with Lady Sara discussing other approaches to the case that looked promising to us, but Lady Sara was like a horse player who continues to back a favourite even when it is dead last at the final turn. She held to her deduction that the murderer had to be a former tenant.

The next morning she invited Chief Inspector Mewer to see her, along with an official of the post office, and they had a long discussion about telegrams. As a result, the offices near Halstead's home and office were to search their files—a tremendous task—for telegrams to or from Halstead.

The Chief Inspector was in a testy mood—he still hadn't identified the murdered man. "Are you trying to pull another needle out of the haystack?" he demanded. "How many times do you expect that to succeed?"

Lady Sara ignored him. "One more thing," she told the postal official. "Please arrange a search of records of Lake District offices for telegrams addressed to Halstead—probably at his office."

Chief Inspector Mewer winced. However, a search of postal records was no problem of his, since his men wouldn't be involved, so he said nothing. Lady Sara got her way as she usually did.

Edward Fallowby telegraphed about noon. He had been in touch with eight other members of the Two Hundred, and all were agreed that Halstead talked like a man who had just seen the play and had been genuinely disappointed by it. But no one had seen him at the theatre. Fallowby promised to continue his enquiries.

Stephen Lynes was a promising young artist and protégé of Lady Sara's. He was the proprietor of a highly successful waxworks on Tottenham Court Road, which she had financed for him. When she needed an artist, he was always available.

She collected him immediately after lunch and took him and me off to the morgue. We were met there by Sir Thomas Tallmage, a distinguished London physician who had been Lady Sara's suitor for more than twenty years.

"What is it you want?" Sir Thomas asked.

"Can you form any notion of what a dead man's voice sounded like from examining his throat?" Lady Sara wanted to know.

Sir Thomas sat down in the nearest chair and stared at her. Then he laughed. "If anyone else had asked me that, I would have thought the question too silly to even consider. Since you are asking me, I suppose I'll have to go through the motions and make some kind of guess."

He did examine the murdered man and found nothing abnormal about his voice box. "He was neither soprano nor bass," he opined. "Since he has a well-developed chest, I would call him a baritone. More than that I can't say—except that if it's a singing role you want him for, he is no longer available for auditions."

Lady Sara thanked him and turned the corpse over to Stephen Lynes. His task was to make a careful drawing of the murdered man. "A lifelike drawing," she said. "Too often photographs of a corpse show a person who is unmistakably dead. I want something that shows what the man looked like when he was alive."

Lynes produced a remarkably lifelike drawing, and Lady Sara immediately asked for several copies. The first two she handed to me. I left at once. My assignment was to get to the Lake District as quickly as possible and assist Charles Tupper, who was already there. At Euston Station I caught a train to Birmingham, where an intersecting line ran directly north to Kendal and the Lake District.

The Lake District centres in the Cumbrian Mountains, and railways shun a mountainous region. In the vicinity of the Lake District, they follow the coast or turn inland to form a complete circle around it. A few branch lines point towards the interior but only for short distances. One of these terminates at Windermere, where Charles Tupper had set up his headquarters.

Charles was waiting for me with a hired trap when I arrived there early next morning, and the first thing I did was hand him Lynes's drawing of the dead man.

"Oh good," he said. "The telegrams are a washout. I think the dead man and Halstead communicated by mail—if they communicated at all and if the dead man did come from here. The written description of him fits a lot of people, so I was reduced to looking for someone from here, and that fits almost anyone."

"The man we want will also be missing," I pointed out.

"True, but he hasn't been missing long enough to be missed. Also, we're getting into fall, and many Lake District residents head for milder climates during the winter. 'Lake District' covers a lot of territory, as you may have noticed, and I've sampled only one small corner of it. What if he comes from the Keswick area on the other side of the mountains?"

"We have to start somewhere," I said, "and, as you said, the drawing should help."

"The drawing should be an immense help."

Charles had a stocky build something like that of a bulldog, which he resembled in his tenacity. With the drawing we retraced the ground he had already covered. In Bowness he had found three promising leads, or at least three leads. The drawing eliminated all of them. In Windermere it was a similar story. We headed north, pursuing a thin scattering of leads through tiny communities.

At Ambleside, we called on the postmistress, a plump, cheerful, businesslike woman who made her cramped post office radiate hospitality. Charles presented Lynes's drawing to her, and she exclaimed at once, "Why, that's Sherwin Danson!"

It didn't take her long to tell us everything she knew about him. He owned a cottage that he occupied from May through October. When cold weather came, he and his housekeeper usually left for Falmouth, but as far as she knew, they were still at the cottage. Danson rarely received any mail. Letters from London? Perhaps one or two in the course of a summer. She gave us careful instructions to finding his cottage.

After an exhausting climb back into the hills, we came upon a pretty cottage with a striking view of the long, gleaming Lake Windermere curving away to the south far below us.

The housekeeper, one Gwenda Owen, a tiny, middle-aged Welsh woman whose English was unexpectedly fluent, received us with puzzlement that changed to confusion when Charles handed her Lynes's drawing of the dead man.

"Yes, yes, that's Mr. Danson. Where did you get it?"

As gently as I could, I explained that the drawing was of a man who'd suffered a serious accident. She was needed in London at once to identify him. She had difficulty understanding why she was needed. "But surely he knows who he is," she kept protesting. When finally she understood, she collapsed completely. That evening, we formed an oddly contrasted group in the Windermere Railway Station. Charles and I were feeling inappropriately exultant for having resolved an impossible problem, but Mrs. Owen was displaying enough grief for the three of us.

Early the next morning, Lady Sara met us at Euston with her

carriage, and we were driven directly to the morgue, where Mrs. Owen had no difficulty making a tearful identification of the dead man as Sherwin Danson. Lady Sara sent a note to Chief Inspector Mewer, who was certain to be both pleased and irritated—pleased to have his work done for him and irritated to find that Lady Sara had stolen another march on him.

We took Mrs. Owen to a small, homey boarding house where Lady Sara thought she would be more comfortable than in a hotel. By the time we got her settled there, she had given us our whole case.

She knew Langley Halstead only by name, but the name was familiar enough. He and Sherwin Danson were cousins. Danson was comparatively well off—he had two or three thousand a year, and since he lived frugally and had no one to spend it on but himself, he appeared to be rolling in money to a spendthrift like Langley Halstead.

Langley Halstead was not well off. He went through life teetering on the edge of bankruptcy.

Danson was a sterling character, a splendid young man; Halstead came as close to being a scoundrel as he dared.

Halstead was Danson's only heir.

With that background, the case practically wrote itself.

Unfortunately, there was no proof. Halstead would claim he was at the theatre at the time of the murder, and some twenty-five members of the Two Hundred would testify that on that night he attended their gathering at the Monica immediately after the play and gave every indication of having just seen it and been disappointed by it. He also would claim he hadn't known his cousin was in London, and unless someone had seen the two of them together, that would be difficult to refute.

Lady Sara was convinced that he had seen the play a night earlier—skipping the club meeting afterwards—which was why he could give such a convincing critique of the play on the night of the murder, but she could no more prove that than she could prove that he was lurking behind the panelling with Sherwin Danson during Cecil Radcliffe's ghostly performance, waiting to murder Danson as soon as the smoke became thick enough.

We still had to explain how Halstead had managed to find out about Cecil Radcliffe's final theatrical performance and how he got himself and his cousin into Vincent Uppington's salon with such precise timing.

We were almost better off when we didn't have a case.

"I think," Lady Sara said, "we will have to contrive something."

"How?" I wanted to know.

"I knew this would happen so I have already started."

Mr. Eldridge Barriman was a theatrical agent. Lady Sara had given him copies of Lynes's drawing, and now he had something for her. We called at his office, taking Mrs. Owen with us, and Mr. Barriman paraded for us six likenesses of Sherwin Danson. Mrs. Owen had been forewarned, or she certainly would have collapsed all over again. They had used makeup to bring their appearances as close as possible to the drawing, and the resemblances were remarkable.

But that wasn't sufficient for Lady Sara. She had each of them speak a few humdrum lines, and she asked Mrs. Owen which sounded most like her master. Mrs. Owen immediately opted for number five, who was more a tenor than a baritone—thus wiping out Sir Thomas Talmage's scientific approach to post-mortem vocal appraisals—whereupon Lady Sara instructed the others to listen carefully to five's voice and try to emulate it.

"We're going to stage a drama," she said. "How well you perform it will determine whether a man gets away with murder."

We left them practicing their vocal imitations. As soon as their costumes were ready, there would be a dress rehearsal.

Lady Sara sent me off to inspect a warehouse in Pudding Lane, just off Lower Thames Street and not far from the river. I was to have a leading role in this drama myself, and she wanted me to make myself familiar with the setting.

The mention of Lady Sara's name got me admitted at once, and I found the warehouse to be a scene of frenzied activity. It looked as though major modifications were underway, with partitions of wood being shuffled about to form a complicated maze. When I tired of jumping out of the way of the workmen, a stairway took me to an upper floor that no longer existed. From behind bales of coarse fabric that filled a narrow balcony, I could look down on the maze from above. The scenario Lady Sara was putting together still wasn't clear to me, but at least I understood what I had to do, and I would be ready when the grand opening came.

Langley Halstead was of medium stature, but the moral shadow he cast was minute. He was a shabby man, and he occupied shabby premises. I wondered, in fact, how he managed to attract any clients at all. The appearance of the man, along with the appearance of his office, should have put them off. He greeted me with what he thought was a warm smile of welcome; it looked more like a grimace to me.

"I need some leases drawn," I told him. "Is this the sort of thing you handle?"

"But of course," he said soothingly.

"I own a warehouse in Pudding Lane just off Lower Thames Street. It is being partitioned into small units to be leased for storage purposes. Several of them are already spoken for. There will be twenty-five when the remodelling is finished. So, hopefully, I will need twenty-five leases—but not all at once, of course. Five or six to begin with and then one or two at a time until all the storage units are leased. Are you interested?"

Langley Halstead definitely was interested. Even if he had expectations of soon being heir to a fortune, he had to have money to keep going on. Probably Effie was demanding her wages, and the seedy-looking clerk in his office looked as though his wages were in arrears also. We made an appointment to visit my warehouse together the next morning.

I was perspiring when I left him. Everything had gone well, but I still couldn't understand what Lady Sara was up to.

The next morning when I escorted Langley Halstead into the warehouse, the workmen were no longer visible, and the place was silent as an empty warehouse could be in that noisy neighbourhood. The scent of fresh sawdust still hung in the air, and probably it helped to assure Halstead that my project was genuine. He gave no sign of suspecting anything.

"The storage units open off this main corridor," I told him. "Go ahead and look around. I want you to have the whole project in mind."

"Mr. Radcliffe has a lifelong interest in the theatre," Lady Sara whispered. "Except for your part, he has directed this scenario himself—and very competently too."

Radcliffe nodded solemnly. He looked as nervous as an amateur actor about to make his first professional appearance.

Below us, Langley Halstead was making a show at doing a thorough job for me. The more pains he took, and the more time, the larger he could make his bill. As Lady Sara had anticipated, he poked into this area and that, going all the way to the far end of the warehouse before he turned back. As he moved along, workmen, carefully keeping out of his sight, silently swung the partitions into different positions. This scenario's props had cost a pretty penny, and Lady Sara seemed pleased at the result.

When Halstead finally had seen enough and started back, he sensed at once that something was wrong. He took a turn he remembered and found himself in a long room he had never seen before. There was no other exit. As he began to retrace his steps, a ghastly scream froze him in his tracks. He spun around—and found himself facing the man he had murdered eight days before,

a man looking exactly like Danson, and sounding like Danson, and dressed exactly as Danson had been on that fatal night in Uppington's salon.

"You treacherous scoundrel!" the image of Sherwin Danson moaned. "Stab me in the back, will you? Now it's your turn!" A cloud of smoke enveloped him. He charged out of it flourishing an ice pick and ran directly at Halstead, who uttered a choking scream himself and fled on feet that terror had lent wings to.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't know exactly where he was. Everything was arranged differently from what he had seen on his way in. In his panicky scramble to get away from the ice pick-wielding ghost, he found himself in a blocked corridor where yet another ghostly Sherwin Danson was waiting.

Halstead froze momentarily, staring as though hypnotized until that figure also charged out of a cloud of smoke waving an ice pick. The scenario was repeated twice more. Finally, one of the ghostly figures got Halstead cornered, another joined him, and another, and in the end, Halstead found himself facing all six of them, all wielding ice picks, and all intent on extracting full payment for the murderous blow Halstead had struck. As they edged towards him, trickles of smoke still rising around them, Halstead turned again and fled. He crashed through a partition, crashed through another—on Lady Sara's orders they had been flimsily constructed—and at length found himself at the street door where I had left him. It was still locked, of course, but he didn't hesitate. He crashed through it and took off at top speed. He might have covered miles before his terror abated, but there were two large constables waiting, and with an "'ere, what's all this?" they collared him.

When they tried to take him back into the warehouse, he collapsed completely, and they had a full confession by the time they got him to the nearest station.

Officially, that ended the case of the ghostly murderer.

Vincent Uppington and his wife decided to put the scene of the murder behind them as soon as they could find an acceptable place to live. Cecil Radcliffe treated them handsomely, generously waiving the penalties he was entitled to and doing everything in his power to speed them on their way.

As a result, when Chief Inspector Mewer insisted on having the crime expounded to him, the site where it occurred was vacant and available. Rick, Charles, and I accompanied Lady Sara to 12 Maxton Place, and both the Chief Inspector and Cecil Radcliffe met us there.

"The crime was made possible by the fact that there is an entrance to the house that even Mr. Radcliffe wasn't aware of," Lady Sara said. "No doubt it resulted accidentally when central heating was installed in both houses. Halstead had a key to the entrance that led down to the furnace room from the outside, and sometime during his occupancy as a tenant, he discovered that pushing aside a panel alongside the stairs gave access to the space between the two houses.

"When he discovered this, he immediately deduced where the ghosts that were plaguing him came from. No doubt he went on from there to discover the panels opening into his salon. He had already arranged to give up his lease on the excuse that the ghosts were disrupting his life—he couldn't afford to keep the house, and this gave him a convenient excuse to leave. For the moment, there seemed to be nothing he could gain from his discovery.

"In the midst of his present financial doldrums, he remembered it and, I suspect, began to frequent Maxton Place in the hope of picking up something of profit. It would not surprise me to learn that Mr. Radcliffe wasn't the only uninvited guest at Vincent Uppington's parties. The next piece of the puzzle is not surprising, considering Halstead's passion for the theatre. He was interested in amateur theatricals himself, belonged to two theatre groups, and—though universally regarded as a very poor actor—always attended casting nights in hope of securing a walk-on part. This is how he became acquainted with an employee of Mr. Radcliffe's theatrical supplier. That individual may have remarked to Halstead—in complete ignorance of the use Mr. Radcliffe's custom-built shoes were to be put to—'Old Radcliffe is taking up theatricals again.' Halstead, who knew how the shoes had produced smoke years before when he was a tenant, guessed what that meant. The ghost was going to make another appearance. He began to speculate as to how to make use of it. He would have no difficulty in obtaining the date of Uppington's next party, what with the provisions ordered and extra servants and musicians engaged.

"Halstead certainly knew he was the only heir of a rich cousin, Sherwin Danson. Probably he thought, as unprincipled heirs so frequently do, that his cousin simply didn't know what to do with his money. Danson came to London occasionally, and Halstead undertook to show him a good time—probably at Danson's expense. It was simple for Halstead to write and say, 'Come to London on such and such a date, and we'll have a great time playing a prank on a practical joker.' Remember—Halstead had seen the ghost appear more than once when he was a tenant, and he was able to anticipate Mr. Radcliffe's plans completely. He knew

the ghost would make his appearance and then vanish in a cloud of smoke by ducking inside the secret panel by the fireplace. The prank he proposed to Danson was to lock the panel that Radcliffe thought was unlocked and watch Radcliffe's antics when he found himself trapped in the middle of his own prank with no way out. Danson was a simpleminded person; that sounded like good fun to him and an appropriate punishment for any landlord unprincipled enough to spoil a tenant's party. So they waited by the panel—and as soon as Radcliffe began to produce smoke, Halstead stabbed Danson in the back, and bending over low to take advantage of the thick smoke near the floor, he quickly dragged the body into the salon, slipped back through the panel, and locked it. He didn't worry about locking the other panel, though he certainly knew about it. Perhaps he thought Radcliffe wouldn't be able to get back through the salon without detection. In any case, he had to get to Shaftesbury Avenue and the meeting of the Two Hundred to establish his alibi. He committed his crime and ran.

"It was almost a perfect crime. The connection of Halstead with this house was ancient and easily overlooked. There was nothing to show that Danson was in London—probably Halstead had told him, dramatically, to burn his letter. And there was nothing to show that Halstead knew he was in London or had been in touch with him. Result: An impossible crime with an unknown victim. And even when the victim finally was identified—which he had to be in order for Halstead to collect his inheritance—there was nothing to connect him to Halstead except their relationship. It all occurred just as Halstead planned because Mr. Radcliffe had decided on one last ghostly fling."

Mr. Radcliffe's sigh seemed to express genuine feeling. "I regret the whole thing deeply, but of course that won't give the young man his life back. But now the ghost definitely is retired, and I'll leave this house vacant as a memorial to Sherwin Danson. It's the least I can do."

The Chief Inspector was scowling at Lady Sara. "You had no evidence at all," he told her severely. "Merely because Halstead leased the premises years ago doesn't connect him with them now, and it certainly doesn't prove he knew how Mr. Radcliffe's ghost performed or when the performance was to take place. You surmised this, you deduced that, you say Halstead must have known about something or other, but you can't prove anything. It's fortunate that Halstead confessed. The Attorney-General would refuse to face a jury without better evidence than that."

"But he has better evidence," Lady Sara said. "He has the best possible evidence."

"What is it?"

"Sherwin Danson's murdered body and the fortune Halstead had hoped to inherit. The crime and the motive. No jury ever has any difficulty in understanding them."

Chief Inspector Mewer wanted to examine the secret panels. He did so, marvelling at the skill with which they were concealed, and then we gathered at the far end of the room from the fireplace and were about to leave.

A loud groan suddenly transfixed all of us. We whirled; standing in front of the fireplace, pose exactly matching that of the portrait, was a white-bearded, black-wigged ghost. Before we could grasp what was happening, clouds of smoke began erupting around him.

Suddenly, Chief Inspector Mewer gave a roar of anger and rushed at the cloud of smoke. He was too late; there was nothing there, and the secret panel was locked.

Lady Sara was delighted. "How charming!" she exclaimed. "How wonderfully appropriate that this case should end with a glimpse of a real ghost!"

Cecil Radcliffe murmured, "If I hadn't seen that with my own eyes . . ."

The Chief Inspector was angry enough to rip open the panel with his bare hands. He thought someone was having a laugh at his expense, and he resented it.

Lady Sara told him to relax. "It is a laugh at all of us," she said soothingly. "This should make the case memorable for you. Few chief inspectors have ever seen a ghost. Most ghosts avoid them. Though I must confess that in a way I found it disappointing. I would venture to say, Mr. Radcliffe, that your own ghostly performance was probably much superior to the real one we just witnessed."

"Do you honestly think so?" Radcliffe sounded gratified.

"I'm convinced of it. If you are wise, you'll leave it at that."

"I will! Oh, I will!"

As our carriage drove off, I asked Lady Sara to account for the extra ghost.

"It bore a noticeable resemblance to Mr. Radcliffe's young footman," she said. "I'm afraid Radcliffe is incorrigible. He so enjoyed staging my warehouse scenario that he has begun a new career. He has retired from acting and taken up directing."

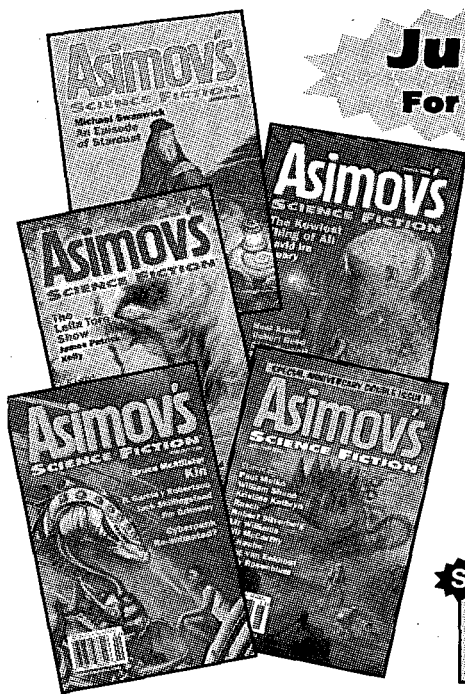
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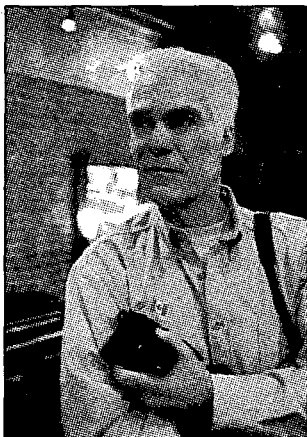
For Gil Garcetti, “keeping it real” isn’t just a slang expression. These days, it’s his job description. Ask Garcetti what his responsibilities are as “consulting producer” on the hit police procedural series *The Closer*, and that’s the answer he’ll give: “My role is to keep it real.”

Garcetti has plenty of experience with the hard realities of law enforcement. He worked in the Los Angeles district attorney’s office for more than thirty years, eight of them as district attorney of L.A. County. During that time, he had regular brushes with Hollywood and the media. (He was D.A. when O. J. Simpson was tried for murder, for instance.) But he never imagined working in show biz himself until he got a phone call from TV producer James Duff, who was developing a new drama called *The D.A.*

“He called me out of the blue and said, ‘I’m putting together a show about a big-city D.A. who really wants to do the right thing—but also wants to be governor of California,’” Garcetti recalls. “I want this to be for an audience that loves to think and look for clues and deal with societal issues. And I want you to be involved to keep it real.”

Duff’s passion and vision won over Garcetti—but not many viewers. Premiering against the NCAA championships in the spring of 2004, *The D.A.* (which starred Steven Weber as the crusading prosecutor) drew weak ratings and was quickly canceled.

It wasn’t long before Garcetti heard from Duff again, however. Garcetti had served as consulting producer on *The D.A.*, and Duff was hoping he’d take the same job on a new series . . . whatever that series might turn out to be. Duff knew it would be a crime drama with a unique twist, but the crucial gimmick was eluding him. Until he talked to Garcetti, that is.



Consulting Producer Gil Garcetti. Photo by Richard Cartwright, courtesy TNT.

"James asked me, 'What's the best thing you could get in terms of evidence to ensure greater success in murder trials?'" Garcetti says. "And I told him, 'It's obvious. A confession.'"

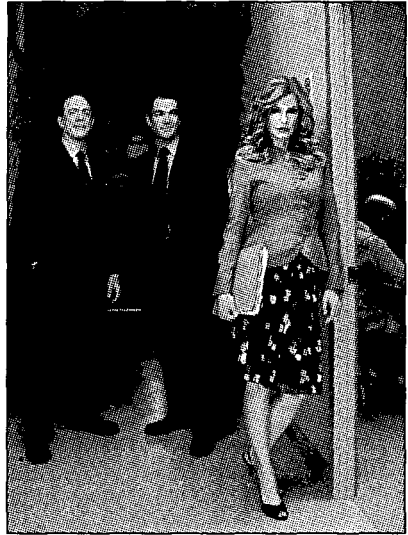
Duff had his twist. His new series—*The Closer*—would focus on a homicide investigator who specializes in coaxing confessions or incriminating statements from cagey suspects. Kyra Sedgwick was cast as the brilliant but quirky heroine, Brenda Johnson, a Southerner who is brought west to head the Los Angeles Police Department's (mythical) Priority Homicide Division.

Though Johnson wasn't welcomed warmly by her LAPD colleagues, *The Closer* received a more enthusiastic reception after premiering on TNT last year: It was the top-rated new cable series of 2005, and Sedgwick was nominated for both a Golden Globe and a Screen Actors Guild Award for her performance as Johnson. Now that the show's returned for a thirteen-episode second season, Garcetti's back too, once again helping the staff writers keep on keeping it real.

All story ideas are run by Garcetti before a script's even written, and the former prosecutor's not shy about shooting down plotlines he finds too far-fetched. He'll even occasionally propose plots himself: The first season episode about a woman who supposedly took out a classified ad inviting men to rape her was based on a bizarre real-life case during Garcetti's tenure as D.A.

Garcetti offers on-set advice too, dropping in during shooting to ensure that what ends up on screen passes his plausibility test. Though he says he rarely asks for script changes once filming's underway, he sometimes catches mistakes a little late—and catches some good-natured flak for doing so.

"On one occasion, it had been a long, difficult take because Kyra had a very large chunk of dialogue to deliver," Garcetti says. "And even though I'd approved the script, I heard something [that was off]. So I wrote out some new dialogue and gave it to the director, and he looked at it and said, 'You're right. That's



J. K. Simmons, Jon Tenney, and Kyra Sedgwick in *The Closer*. Photo by Andrew Eccles, courtesy TNT.

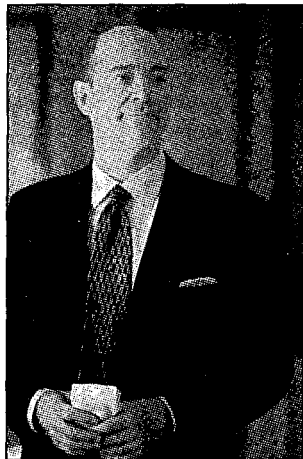
better. Wait here a minute.' And he walked it over to Kyra. She heard him out, looked at me, flipped me off, smiled—and then nailed it on the first take."

Closer fans anxious for more such behind-the-scenes tidbits should keep their eyes peeled for one of Garcetti's many side projects. A celebrated photographer, Garcetti's been documenting the production of the show on film, and a book of his on-set pictures is in the works. Though he retired from politics after losing the race for Los Angeles D.A. in 2000, he's stayed active in civic life, serving as president of the Los Angeles Ethics Commission (which keeps a watchful eye on city politicians) and traveling to Africa to promote programs for safe drinking water and the empowerment of women.

Yet as busy as he is—and as hectic as TV production can be—Garcetti still thinks he's got it easy these days.

"I feel a responsibility to try to keep the show at the high level of quality we had in the first season," he says. "But that's a much different kind of stress than having to pick up the *Los Angeles Times* in the morning and find out what one of your employees did the day before. If everything went well, the deputy D.A. handling a case would get all the credit. But if something went wrong, everyone was screaming, 'Where's the boss?'"

When the detectives on *The Closer* start screaming "Where's the boss?", that's usually J. K. Simmons's cue. The fifty-one-year-old actor plays Will Pope, the assistant police chief who oversees Brenda Johnson's Priority Homicide team. Over the years, Simmons has made a specialty of playing gruff, sardonic authority figures (including *Law & Order*'s Dr. Emil Skoda and *Spider-Man*'s cigar-chomping boss, J. Jonah Jameson).



J. K. Simmons. Photo by Peter Hopper Stone, courtesy TNT

"I'm a bald white guy with a low voice, so it seems like a natural fit," Simmons says with a deep rumble of a laugh.

But the actor offers another, less obvious reason for all the roles he's won as cops, doctors and soldiers.

"It's karmic payback for my difficulties with authority figures," he jokes, saying he was a troublemaking rebel in his youth.

Fortunately, that young rebel eventually found his cause in a surprising place: the opera house. During his col-

lege days, Simmons (born Jonathan Kimble Simmons) studied music theory, with hopes of becoming a composer or opera singer one day. That led to a career in musical theater—and love. He met his wife, actress Michelle Schumacher, while appearing in a Broadway revival of *Peter Pan*. (Schumacher played Tiger Lily; Simmons was Captain Hook.)



G. W. Bailey and Kyra Sedgwick in *The Closer*. Photo by Peter Hopper Stone, courtesy TNT.

Though his tough-guy roles don't give him many opportuni-

ties to strut his song-and-dance stuff, Simmons doesn't pine for a return to the Great White Way.

"I don't miss the theater schedule because you're doing six nights a week and five [shows] on the weekend," he says. "It doesn't allow for much family time."

Not that Simmons' schedule isn't full. Until recently, he was one of the busiest character actors on the East Coast, juggling film roles with semiregular appearances in New York-based TV shows such as *Law & Order* and *Oz*. (Simmons played creepy white-supremacist inmate Vern Schillinger on the gritty prison series.) After moving to Southern California in 2003, Simmons quickly went from "busy" to "ubiquitous," popping up in a slew of features films (including *The Ladykillers*, *Hidalgo*, and *Thank You for Smoking*) and TV series (*Without a Trace*, *Numb3rs*, and *Nip/Tuck*, to name but a few).

Like Gil Garcetti, he came to *The Closer* by way of *The D.A.*—he was a regular on the short-lived ABC series, playing embittered Deputy District Attorney Joe Carter. Though that gig didn't last long, he didn't hesitate to sign on for a new series from the same creative team.

"I think I was the first guy they hired for *The Closer*," says Simmons (who, along with his castmates, was nominated for a Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Drama Series). "Having done [James Duff's] scripts before and having worked with [the other *D.A./Closer* producers], I was ready to do whatever they got up to next. You won't find any stereotypes on this show. The characters are all shaded—and that's going to continue as we get to know them better."



NEXT OF KIN

WILLIAM LINK

Annabella was synchronizing her aerobics with an old Raquel Welch tape on her VCR when the phone rang.

"You sound out of breath," Janice said. "Business or pleasure?"

"Neither." There was a fresh, longitudinal streak of sweat on the front of her leotard. It tickled.

Janice chuckled. "Well, conserve your strength, honey. You got an out-call in Silver Lake, 109 Montrose."

Annabella groaned. She had wanted the whole afternoon to herself to pick up some dry cleaning, check out a new computer, get a manicure appointment. "Damn. What time?"

"Four."

She jotted it down. "Where's Montrose exactly?"

"Beats me. Use your Thomas Guide or look it up on MapQuest. Who's that talking?"

"Just a tape." She silenced it with the remote. "Hot again?"

Janice sounded surprised. "You been in all morning?"

Annabella didn't think she deserved an answer. She was already twisting out of her leotard, juggling the phone.

"Hot. And smoggy. Might have something for you this evening too."

"Leave it on my machine." She hung up.

Naked, she went into the tiny kitchenette, opened a can of V8, gulped it, finished a container of peach yogurt while she skimmed through Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," and took a cup of instant coffee into the bathroom. After her shower, she fixed her hair into a ponytail and made her face up in a bulb-ringed mirror that she always saw in the old movie musicals. Then she put on a low-cut, silk black blouse and midnight blue slacks, and impaled her still-damp lobes with a glitzy, scarab-shaped pair of earrings. She decided against the black snakeskin boots—too hot. She wasted ten minutes choosing the proper shoes. An analyst had once told her that the shoe fetish was some kind of surrogate prophylactic, a protection to ward off an onslaught of venereal germs, even AIDS. "But doctor," she remembered telling him, "wouldn't I be just as obsessed choosing a pair of panties?"

In the car, driving, she looked at herself in the rearview mirror. The mask of sunglasses across her eyes, the tiny drops of sweat in the sleek, dark wings of her hair.

She hadn't been in Silver Lake in months. She didn't much like it. Once a community of low- and middle-income families in shabby frame bungalows, it was slowly in the expanding throes of gentrification, like a fat lady opening her corset. As usual in L.A., the real estate people were getting rich. But they would never get rid of the hazy smog that barely hid the San Gabriel Mountains to the north.

The house she was looking for was a shimmer of faded beige stucco, slatted windows, a sagging porch. No car on the drive or in the carport. Either the guy was out, had forgotten the appointment, or worse yet, didn't even drive a car in a city that made one a necessity. Instinctively, she touched her handbag on the seat beside her, felt the reassuring flat bulk of the mace canister.

She parked in the drive and got out, smelling hot tar. She went up the porch steps and peered in through the screen door at a dark living room. Someone was lying on the floor. But then she made out that it was the sprawled form of a dog, hunkered next to the dim, flowered shape of a sofa.

She rang the bell.

"Just a minute," a voice called. "Coming."

A disembodied T-shirt sorted itself out of the dimness. A compact, stocky young man came toward her, moving slowly, almost cautiously. The T-shirt read "No Clever Message."

He stopped at the screen door. He had a wiry, unkempt, full black beard and very pale blue eyes, with beads of sweat shining in his curly black hair. "Who—?"

"You called the out-service."

"Yes."

He groped around and finally unlatched the door. He held it open awkwardly as she came in, blinking in the stale air, holding back a sneeze brought on by the musty, uninvited atmosphere.

The dog growled. Now she saw it in a better light—a large Alaskan Malamute, its thick coat the color of mottled oatmeal, powerful, but old, and probably more lethargic than lazy. She immediately didn't like it. The analyst had excavated the probable cause: As a child she had gone to Mass by herself on Sunday mornings, leaving her indolent, agnostic parents in bed. The Sabbath world of Milan was a din of dogs and church bells, some of the animals fierce, some tethered, some loose and on the prowl.

A friend had told her that dogs can detect fear through their ultrasensitive olfactory nerves, and she was sure that her sweat

glands had betrayed her. Luckily, she had never been attacked, although a mean Weimaraner had once followed her right to the church door.

"Herman," the young man said, "cool it."

She noticed there were no lights lit in the living room. There was a set of jazz drums near the sofa, a couple of director-type chairs with their canvas backs, but no television set. And no books or magazines or newspapers. All the scant furniture looked like secondhand castaways.

The young man mumbled something.

"What?"

"What's your name?"

She was going to have to get all the money up front. "Annabella."

He nodded to himself, an act of assimilation. He wore bleached-out jeans and topsiders. All his clothing was very clean. But there was something off-kilter about him—something elusive, hidden, that she couldn't quite put her finger on. She was staring at him, examining everything about him, but he didn't seem to mind or, for that matter, even seem to notice. Strange.

"Would you care for some apple cider? The only trouble is it's warm. The refrigerator's shut off."

He didn't pay his light bill? "No. Thank you."

"You mind if I have one? A beer, I mean?"

"No, go ahead." She watched him head toward what she supposed was the kitchen. He moved very deliberately, almost cautiously, as if he was afraid he might trip over something. The dog had stiffened, its head nodding at his slow progress to the refrigerator. The young man seemed sealed in a protective bubble, guided by the dog's sonar.

"Sure you don't want something?"

"No. I'm sure."

He came slowly back with a can of Miller Light, popping it open as he walked. "Annabella. Didn't you say that's what your name is?"

"Yes. What's yours?"

"Corey."

She noticed he wasn't looking at her before she spoke. But now his head turned a fraction, locked in on her voice, and she knew her suspicion was correct.

She said, "You can't see, can you?"

He blushed. "No, I can't."

She looked into his eyes. They were slightly milky, protuberant, as if coated with a special membrane.

As if trying to deflect her perception, he said, "You have some sort of an accent."

"Italian."

"Italian Italian?"

"Right."

"What are you doing here, in this country, I mean?"

"Going to school. UCLA."

"And you moonlight this kind of—work?"

"Right." She smiled. "Well, it's not my major, if that's what you mean."

He thought this over. "What is your major?"

"American lit."

"Guess it pays a lot of bills. Your work, I mean."

She removed the beer can from his hand, took a few sips, handed it back. Then she unconsciously nodded toward the hallway, which she imagined led to the bedroom. "Think we can get down to it?"

He seemed suddenly apprehensive. "Yeah. I guess so."

"I have to get paid in advance. That's the rule."

"Okay, sure. How much?"

"Didn't they tell you on the phone? Two hundred."

He took out a wallet and dug around inside the bill compartment. She decided he wasn't really a bad-looking guy. A strong, almost Toltec face like the illustrations in the anthropology textbooks, and nice biceps and pecs. Maybe he worked with barbells or bench-pressed. The drums, that was it. She had dated a jazz drummer with wrists like pig iron. All the drummers she had known were working out an extraordinary amount of hostility; most had fuses as short as their stature.

"Here." He handed her a small sheaf of bills. "Two hundred exactly."

"If you don't mind me asking," she said, "how do you get the right amount?"

"I bend the corners. Look—"

She did. The denominations were folded in different corners. "Very clever. Shall we?"

He turned toward the hallway. She looked over at the dog. He had rarely moved since she was there. These seeing-eye dogs were like people, some a little sad-eyed, shy, introverted, children really. The damn creature hadn't even barked.

The bedroom was a suffocating cell, no air-conditioning, window closed. There was a pine bureau, cheap and unstained, and an enormous brass bed pushed against the wall.

She smacked her hand against the mattress. Not too soft. "This is quite a production."

"The bed? It was my parents'."

"Maybe you got conceived on this monstrosity." She wished she could take that back—too disrespectful.

He was silent. He stood in the doorway, his head tilted down at the worn pile carpet, not even bothering to get undressed. The dog came slowly in, settled itself under the only window.

She tried some humor. "Herman going to watch?"

"Does it matter?"

She kicked off her shoes, unbuttoned her blouse, and slipped it off with her slacks. All dolled up for a blind man. While she folded and placed her garments over her handbag on the floor, she slid the bills inside.

She ran her hands provocatively down her body as if he was a sighted person. "How about you? Your clothes?"

"Lay down on the bed," he said.

"Like this, in my bra and panties, or—?"

"You can keep your underwear on." He was leaning back against the bureau, looking in her direction, slightly crouched.

She climbed on top of the sheets. They smelled of dried sweat. "Can't you get yourself an air-conditioner?"

No reply. She propped herself against the meager pillows and angled her arms behind her head in a parody of sexual abandon. That's just great, she thought, striking a *Penthouse* pose for a guy who can't see. This was getting depressing, more than usual. She began to think about the paper she had to write on Stephen Crane, another depressing thought. What the hell was her approach going to be?

She watched with curiosity as he opened the top bureau drawer and removed a pint of Jim Beam. At least it was action, something positive, instead of just standing there like the recently condemned. He unscrewed the cap and took two long pulls. The Adam's apple in his throat bobbed and he coughed, then cleared his throat.

"Go easy," she said. "Not good for performance."

"Probably not." He took another short swallow.

She tensed, no longer thinking of the Crane paper. His dead eyes seemed brighter, the membrane dissolved.

He came slowly over to the bed and sat down beside her. His hand moved on the sheet, found her, lifted her head, and guided it back almost between two brass rods on the headboard. There was a faint metallic click as he snapped what felt like a bracelet around her left wrist, the steel band cold against her skin. Another click.

She half raised herself on her free elbow. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

His face was close to hers, his breath alive with whiskey. No reply.

She felt along the short length of chain and found that the bracelet was linked around a rod on the headboard. Maybe—maybe he was into some kinky but harmless S&M thing. “I hope you’ve got a key.”

“What good’s a key?” he said, each word spaced as if the liquor was stoking him down. He rose unsteadily from the bed and went back to the bureau. More bourbon.

“I can yell,” she threatened. She strained her ears. Was that the distant whirr of a power lawn mower? “Somebody’ll hear and come.”

He listened too, cocking his head, suddenly looking directly at her. Maybe his eyesight was as good as hers.

She said, “You can really see, can’t you? You’ve been lying to me.”

He shook his head no and wiped his wet mouth with the back of his hand.

“Why the hell are you doing this? We were going to make love, we were going to have fun. You even paid me.”

“I want you to stay.”

Oh God, he’s a real headcase, she thought. If L.A. didn’t grow them, they imported them. “I can’t stay, Corey. I’ve got another call tonight, and I have to start a paper for my lit course.”

Still carrying the bottle, he sat down again on the edge of the bed. Except for handcuffing her to the headboard, she couldn’t remember if he had touched her.

“Come on, Corey,” she said gently. “Let me loose and I promise you we’ll have a good time.”

Herman yawned, stretched. He came over and sat down next to the young man, lowered his handsome head onto the sheet.

“Corey, I’ll scream. I can really scream.”

“There’s just an alley outside the window. Nobody’ll hear.”

She scrunched up against the headboard and leaned back, twisting, to examine the pair of handcuffs. Oxidized steel, blue-black, like maybe the kind cops used. Where in God’s name had he got the damn things? Maybe his father was a cop.

“Is your father a cop?”

“My father’s dead.” He was petting the dog’s head.

“Don’t you have any friends?”

“Just Herman.” He was still working on the bourbon.

Shoring up his courage, she thought. For what? Poor bastard, blind, living alone with his seeing-eye dog, no friends, especially no girlfriends.

"Come on, honey," she said, afraid to touch his face. "Unlock this thing, I'll give you a nice massage. Then we'll make love. I'll show you a real good time. You'll like it. I promise."

She prayed that after enough of the courage-strengthening alcohol he would spread-eagle her on the bed and get to work. But he looked totally anesthetized by either the liquor or his fear or both. His strangely placid eyes were dazed, increasingly unfocused, and he stretched out an arm to steady himself on the mattress.

Maybe she should cool the sex talk, try another tack. She said, "You look tired, honey. Why don't you settle down here beside me?"

He looked in her direction for a long moment. No, she thought, he's blind as a bat, I was wrong. The eyes seemed opaque now, smooth and veined like marble.

He crumpled down next to her, suddenly docile as a child. She trailed her long, blood-red fingernails lightly across his forehead. He was burning hot, feverish. Her fingers flicked across his temple, light as a butterfly. When she eased over to kiss him she realized he had fallen fast asleep. The dog lay collapsed at the foot of the bed, snoring.

She twisted her body to the side of the mattress, arrested by the chain, and flailed her arm over the side, trying to locate her handbag and the mace canister. But it was out of reach, a few feet away.

Oh Christ, she thought, how did I ever get myself into something like this? She had only one other threatening experience: A crazed out-of-town salesman in a bungalow at the Bel Air Hotel had pointed a handgun at her navel.

When room service came with their shrimp cocktails and steaks, she managed to slip out naked, vomiting in the little stream out front among the floating swans. After that she always carried her mace safeguard.

She turned over on her stomach and massaged the raw skin where the steel bracelet cut into her wrist. Then she sighed and closed her eyes. She felt empty of adrenaline, everything, and within seconds she too was asleep.

At first she didn't know if she was dreaming or if she was in a half cogent stage of sleep. Corey was saying, close to her ear, "... Mrs. Dimas in Covina. Mrs. Hannah Dimas ..."

She mumbled, "Who?"

"Tell her ... I appreciate all she's done. And—and that I love her."

"Yeah, but who is she? Can't—can't you tell her yourself?"

He was muttering something else, but she was falling back asleep ...

She was almost awake now. Her eyes snapped open and the first

thing she realized was that he was no longer in the bed. The window, behind dirty aluminum blinds, showed long strips of tawny twilight, an unearthly, almost marine glow. Herman was still sleeping, still as a rock.

"Corey," she called. Then more loudly, "Corey!"

Maybe, half asleep, he had wandered back into the living room or the kitchen to get another beer and had collapsed on the floor or the sofa.

"Corey!"

The dog stirred but didn't wake.

She acknowledged to herself, with a cold, sick feeling in her stomach, that the little bungalow was empty.

She suddenly felt the hot rush of tears, but she willed them away. She was abandoned again, like when her father left her mother, and there was no one who would come to help them. She would starve to death in the big brass bed.

Soon, weariness replaced her apprehension again. The twilight slowly faded into darkness, and the room became velvet and strangely restful. It was then that she realized she was still wearing her sunglasses. She was almost too tired to take them off.

Voices floated through the tunnel of her sleep. There was still darkness outside the window when she woke, and she heard the voices, which seemed to come from outside, receding into the distance.

She wanted to know the time, but she realized her watch was on her handcuffed wrist.

Herman barked. He lifted himself sluggishly and prowled over to the door.

From somewhere, probably the living room, there was the scraping sound of a key in a lock. Voices again, two people. Corey coming back, but who was with him? The click of a switch, on and off, on and off.

"Must've turned off the power," a man's voice said. "Didn't pay his bill."

Pause. Then, calling: "Anybody home?"

Footsteps. She decided not to answer, lay perfectly still, scarcely breathing. Curious, the dog left the room, investigating.

"Here boy," a second voice called. It held the remnants of a Southern accent. "Everything's all right, fella. Don't worry any, we'll feed you."

More footsteps, stopping, starting, obviously covering the living room and the kitchen. Then a shard of light slanted against the far wall of the bedroom from the hallway. A moment later, bringing her free hand across her eyes, shielding them, she was staring through her fingers into the blinding bull's-eye of a flashlight.

"What do we have here? Miss?"

She kneaded her eyes and the red dancing circles began to dissolve. There were two uniformed policemen in the doorway, one black, one white.

The black man, holding the flashlight, moved closer. "You awake, miss?"

"Yes." Her voice was hoarse with sleep and disuse.

"Who are you?" Then he noticed she was handcuffed to the headboard. He frowned. He had a broad, magisterial face like an African chieftain. "Jimbo," he said over his shoulder to his partner.

The other man came forward. He was carrying an unlit flashlight and a large manila envelope.

The black cop took the envelope and shook its contents out on the sheet. There was a wallet, a few loose coins, a comb, and a key ring. He picked up the key ring, washed it in the glare of his flashlight, selected one of the keys, and quickly opened the handcuff.

Her relief was instant. Her arm was numb, the fingers tingling, and she rubbed at the red band of inflamed skin around her wrist. Now it began to itch like hell, but it nevertheless felt good, very good.

The black cop said, "He do this to you?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"You his wife?"

"Friend. Just a friend."

She pitched herself over to the side of the bed, tried to stand, and the cop steadied her as she wavered, was about to fall. She was lightheaded. She experienced a brief bout of dizziness, and then she was all right.

"Why'd he lock you up?"

She shrugged. "Crazy. Just spaced out."

"He ever do this to you before?"

"No."

"Where do you live?"

"West Hollywood."

The man seemed genuinely puzzled. "You mean he just invited you over here and did this?"

"Right. Where is he?"

The white cop looked straight at her. "Dead." He was the one with the accent.

She started. "Dead? But he was just here . . . a couple of hours ago." She stared at him. "How?"

"Walked across the Hollywood Freeway. Near the Silver Lake off-ramp."

She sat down on the bed. It was beginning to lighten between

the slats of the blinds. She could hear, far off, the grinding of a garbage truck.

She said, "Suicide?"

"Probably."

"He was blind, did you know he was blind? It could have been an accident."

"Well, witness says he walked right into a stream of traffic. He wasn't deaf too, was he? So what was he doing taking a stroll across the freeway at night?"

She was looking down at the pathetic little group of effects on the sheet. "These are his things?"

"What we could find on what was left of him."

The black cop picked up the almost empty bottle of bourbon, handed it to her. She swallowed what remained, coughed, and was almost sick again. He patted her on the back and waited while her head cleared.

The white cop said, "You'll have to make a statement."

She nodded, navigated a few tentative steps toward the door. The black cop stopped her, gave her one of Corey's shirts to put on. Then the two men and the dog followed her into the living room. A few bars of sunlight filtered in, gleaming on the metal rim of the snare drum. Herman settled down, yawned, not yet missing his master.

"What are you going to do with the dog?" she asked.

"Get him to the seeing-eye people," the black man said. "But he looks pretty old to be placed with another blind person."

He shined the light into the dog's face, bending down beside it. "Jesus," he said, "look at his eyes. Wall-eyed blind. Poor bastard. Must've got progressively worse as he aged."

Annabella put a steadying hand on the sofa. One shock after another. She said nothing for a long time. The two men respected her silence. As the room brightened the flashlight was clicked off.

She finally asked, "What was his name?"

"You were his friend," the white cop said suspiciously "and you don't know his name?"

"Just his first name—Corey."

"Dimas. Card in his wallet says Corey Dimas."

She nodded to herself. His voice echoed back from the core of the night, his whispered message, and now she understood. He probably couldn't trust his handwriting to leave a note, if he could write at all anymore.

"Can I make a call?" she asked them.

"Guess so. Who to?"

"Next of kin."

She tried the phone but it was dead, just like the electricity. So she had to go back to the bedroom to get the cell phone in her handbag. She returned to the living room, sighed deeply, and punched information while the two men watched her.

She slumped down on the sofa, got the number she needed from information. Her mind went blank for a moment before she remembered to punch in the number. She let her head rest against the pillow, succumbing now to a terrible fatigue as the call went through, a stray thought surfacing, slowly becoming tangible. She wondered if her landlord allowed dogs. ♫

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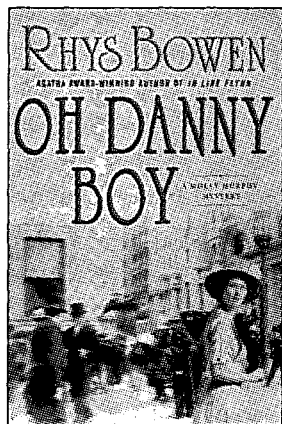
ROBERT C. HAHN

We might consider that the American female private eye was born in the 1980s when three authors created a remarkable trio of sleuths whose continuing exploits still set a high standard today: Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, and Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski. But if it took a long time for the female private eye to become a familiar component of the mystery scene, today's authors are certainly making up for lost time by reaching into the past to create fictional antecedents for today's lady sleuths. New books by Rhys Bowen, Sandra Scoppettone, and Tori Carrington feature female P.I.'s at work in New York. While the obstacles they each face because of their gender, heritage, or religion may vary, they each exhibit their own unique combination of perseverance, bravery, and ingenuity.

In the fifth book of the series that takes place at the dawn of the twentieth century, *OH DANNY BOY* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), Rhys Bowen's Molly Murphy is in somewhat of a dither over the attentions of a good Jewish man and the deceit of New York City police detective, Daniel Sullivan, and is considering leaving New York for the Nebraska "frontier." When she learns that Daniel has been arrested for taking a bribe (a common practice then) and is imprisoned in the notorious prison, The Tombs, she relents and agrees to help prove his innocence—a task that turns out to be truly daunting.

Caught red-handed by the new reform-minded police commissioner and further implicated in trying to set up an illegal boxing match between champion Gentleman Jack Brady and a challenger, Sullivan is without means of posting bond and unable to conduct or even direct his own investigation into the artfully contrived setup. A series of brutal murders of young women presumed to be prostitutes adds a further complication and sends Molly scurrying into the dark recesses of early forensic investigation as she seeks to uncover who is behind the plot against Sullivan.

Molly overcomes obstacles of gender and class and religious prejudice as she strives to prove Sullivan's innocence. Deftly woven into the young Irish immigrant woman's adventures are historical figures



and vignettes of daily life that make the Molly Murphy books rich tapestries to be savored rather than devoured. Aside from her delightfully Bohemian friends "Sid" (Elena Goldfarb) and "Gus" (Augusta Mary Walcott), her best ally is police matron Sabella Goodwin, also a real person and one of the key figures Bowen co-opts for her novel. The attractions (and abominations) of Coney Island, rampant gang activity, endemic police corruption, and perils of prostitution form a vivid backdrop. In Molly Murphy, Bowen has crafted a heroine whose grit is more than a match for the dominant males, be they police officials, gang leaders, or would-be suitors.

Almost a half century later, Faye Quick moves from secretary to PI when her boss, Woody Mason, enlists after Pearl Harbor and leaves Faye in charge of his agency in Sandra Scoppettone's *TOO DARN HOT* (Ballantine, \$24.95). Faye proves to be as tough, as resilient, and as capable as women proved themselves to be in countless "masculine" jobs during that era. Scoppettone's earliest genre books were written under the pseudonym Jack Early (*Razzmatazz*; *Donato and Daughter*), but her long career has established her as an author who can change with the times, including this reach back to WWII for her latest stereotype-busting PI story.

The beautiful Claire Turner—a "long drink of water" with "perfect measurements" and "full lips painted ruby red"—is straight out of central casting. She comes to Faye because her soldier boyfriend, home on leave, has disappeared. Faye is soon embroiled in a case of murder and kidnapping that has her spinning from one scenario to another as her client and the missing boyfriend prove almost impossible to pin down.

Scoppettone has good fun with her story, making frequent references to the hit songs and movies of the day and filling the books with character names that should strike a chord with anyone old enough to remember the film stars of yesterday. In addition to Turner and Mason, other characters sport names such as Widmark, Mitchum, Powell, Lake, Cooper, and Fontaine, which are redolant of Hollywood in the 1940s. Scoppettone has created a nice sendup of the old hardboiled P.I. that shows Faye Quick can take her place alongside Spade and Marlowe and company without missing a beat.

Tori Carrington's P.I. Sofie Metropolis returns for her second outing in *DIRTY LAUNDRY* (Forge, \$23.95) and brings us up to the present day with a droll approach to crimesolving while attempting to solve some of the lingering gender and cultural biases facing female PIs.

The wife/husband writing team of Lori and Tony Karayianni combine elements found in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* with the kind of capers Janet Evanovich's Stephanie Plum has made famous, and the result is Sofie, a Greek-American woman swimming against the tidal forces of family expectations with predictably

little success but also with the resolve to continue on.

Sofie may work for her Uncle Spyro's detective agency but in her second case, her most important assignment comes from her redoubtable mother, Thalia, who volunteers her to look into the disappearance of Apostolis Pappas. Known as Uncle Tolly, the laundry owner has left behind his new Mercedes and a wife who's anxious to sell it. Turns out that Tolly's laundry may have been used to clean money as well as clothes, and suspicion is that the Mafia may be behind his disappearance.

So in addition to the Greek family that seems to include everyone in the neighborhood, Sofie also gets involved with the Italians in the area, principally through a high school classmate, Tony DiPiazza, who now owns three dance clubs and is "connected." The ethnic humor is definitely good-natured rather than mean-spirited. Carrington's filled the book with characters that are easily recognizable yet have enough originality to stand out.

Japanese author Miyuki Miyabe's third novel to be translated to English, *CROSSFIRE* (Kodansha, \$24.95), follows the paths of Junko Aoki, a young vigilante with the ability to start fires by will power, and arson investigator Chikako Ishizu. Chikako, who was previously introduced in 2005's *Shadow Family*, attempts to solve a string of devastating arson cases that have conveniently made casualties of modern Japan's sickest offenders. And the trail of ashes leads to Junko.

After accidentally witnessing the murder of an innocent young couple, Junko sets out to avenge their deaths, torching her way through an urban landscape full of motley criminals who have so far managed to elude capture. Meanwhile, Junko's conspicuous executions attract the attention of the police and media, and also a secret organization with a suspiciously similar agenda.

Crossfire is framed as a police procedural, but the novel focuses most on Junko's psychological journey. The progress of Chikako's investigation becomes an afterthought to Junko's struggle to right her past, her loneliness and feelings of alienation, and her conflicted roles as both heroine and villain.

Miyabe received critical acclaim in the United States for her previously translated titles, *Shadow Family* and *All She Was Worth*, which showcased the author's flair for sparse and nuanced prose. *Crossfire* too employs this tack, though the action at times is slow coming and the novel struggles to overcome the comic book air of its pyrokinetic premise ("They're going to die. I'll barbeque them," Junko once declares before a kill). Nevertheless, Miyabe delivers a thoughtful narrative that is a drama more than thriller, yet more suspenseful than it is supernatural.

—Nicole K. Sia

THE MANKILLER OF POOJEEGAI

WALTER SATTERTHWAIT

Everybody wants to know about the Mankiller. "Tell us about the Mankiller, tell us about the Mankiller!" Sometimes I wonder—what is it with you people? Haven't you got anything better to do? Haven't you got lives?

Okay, fine. The Mankiller. Don't forget to put your donations in the hat.

It happened back in the Old Days. Looking back on those times, it seems that the sun was always shining in a bright blue, cloudless sky, that the grass was always swaying in a warm, sweet gentle breeze. That life was always just about perfect.

Which is ridiculous, of course. Things seem that way now because Memory is a better storyteller than even an old pro like me. It deliberately forgets a few items, items like cave bears and saber-toothed tigers and pestilence, and it polishes up everything that's left until it's all gleaming and shiny. And if that's not storytelling, I don't know what is.

Right. The Mankiller.

I was in the cave, pounding acorns, which was my share of the division of labor, or part of it. I also gathered the acorns, and when the flour was ready, I rolled the dough and I baked the bread. Ursula, my wife, ate the bread. That was her share.

I was just finishing up when Ursula came sauntering into the cave. "Marta wants to see you," she said.

Inside me, I could feel my heart dislodge itself from the walls of my chest, getting ready to sink. "See me about what?" I asked.

"How should I know? Make sure you clean off before you go."

She was a beautiful woman, Ursula, with the most impressive eyebrow ridge I've ever seen, one that ran from ear to ear over her deeply set dark brown eyes, like a ledge. Occasionally, I still dream about that lovely brow of hers. But as a person, she was sometimes a bit difficult.

I stood up and I brushed flour from my arms. "Marta didn't say?"



"No. But one of those smelly Outlanders was with her. And so was your friend Berthold."

My heart sank.

"You've got flour on your chin," said Ursula.

Within fifty feet of Marta's cave, I could smell the stench of Outlander.

We didn't socialize much with the Outlanders back then. This was partly because we had some fairly strong cultural taboos against mingling with strangers—and the Outlanders were nothing if not strange—but mostly because, to put it delicately, they stank. It was a vile smell, something like cumin, but darker and stronger and more penetrating, the smell of a cumin that had grown moldy and rotten. Over the years, they've grown a little less rank. Or maybe, like all my other organs, my nose is coming up short these days.

Inside the cave, Marta was sitting on her ceremonial throne, wearing the ceremonial lion skin over her shoulders. Gunnar, her consort, was sitting on one of the rocks in front of her, and Berthold the Meadmaster was sitting on another with that damned leather sack of his resting between his legs. A third rock was taken up by the Outlander, who was dressed in standard Outlandish garb: a pair of leather pants and a red plaid shirt. Around his wrist he wore a bracelet of black pearls. The Outlanders were big on jewelry.

Here in the Royal Chamber, the stench was a lot stronger. Gunnar, I noticed, was sniffing. He was a sensitive lad.

I nodded to Marta. "Greetings, Most Slender of Queens."

"Greetings, Doder, Son of Watt. I believe that you know Bob, the leader of the Outlanders."

I nodded to him. "Greetings, Bob."

"Hey, man," he said. "What's happening?"

Although his use of The Language was a bit peculiar, Bob spoke it surprisingly well. I've heard people say that the Outlanders are stupid. From my own personal experience, this simply isn't true. They do look odd, I admit, with those slippery bodies and those pathetic tufts of hair sprouting from their tiny heads. And they do possess a few bizarre habits, like worshiping thunder gods and wearing clothes. And they do, of course, stink. But I've never had any doubts about their intelligence. They're the ones, after all, who invented the bow and arrow—definitely a big improvement, huntingwise, over trying to sweet talk a mammoth into leaping off a cliff. All in all, they're very clever fellows.

"And naturally," said Marta, "you know Gunnar."

"Greetings, Doder," said Gunnar, who coughed slightly. His eyes

were watering. But so, by then, were mine. Reek was wafting from Bob like gas from a swamp.

"Greetings, Gunnar," I said.

"And Berthold is an old friend," she said.

That was an exaggeration, but I nodded. "Berthold," I said.

From his rock, Berthold smiled one of his cryptic smiles.

"Berthold," said Marta, "has need of your assistance."

"In what way, Your Awesomeness?"

"There has been a tragedy among the Outlanders." She turned to Bob. "Please explain to Doder."

"The Mankiller of Poojeegai," he explained.

"What's a Poojeegai?" I asked him.

"That's the name of the village, man. Our village."

I hadn't known their name for the village. We always referred to it as The Sink of Stinks. "And what's this mankiller?" I asked him.

"That's what we call it, man. It's a lion. It kills people. It's killed three of us already. You remember Tammy?"

"Yes." Tammy was one of their females.

"She was the first. That was last week. Over the weekend, it killed Wally the Water Bearer. And then yesterday, man, it got Art the Archer. A friend of his, Lou, went in to get him this morning, and poor Art was scattered all over the living room."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "What's a living room?"

"That's the part of the house where we mostly hang out. It's just off the kitchen usually, where we do all the cooking. You know about cooking, right?"

"Of course I know about cooking."

"Anyway, that's where Art was scattered all over."

"Terrible. But how does Berthold fit into all this?"

"Berthold's going to help us stalk the thing."

I turned to the Meadmaster. "That's very generous of you, Berthold." I turned to Marta. "Your Suppleness, I'm afraid that this time I won't be able to assist Berthold."

"And why is that?"

"I'm allergic to cats. Big cats, little cats, any kind of cat. I get hives."

"You need have no fear," she said, a remark that always strikes me, no matter who makes it, as monumentally shortsighted. "The Great Mother will protect you." Marta was the Great Mother's local representative.

"Sure, I understand that, your Slimness. But the thing is—"

"You were of great help to Berthold in the matter of The Disappearing Necklace of Pretty Blue Stones. And also in the matter of The Mysterious Destruction of Poor Ulrich." She could do

that, talk in capital letters. It's something that comes easily to queens, I've noticed.

"Yes," I said, "but—"

"The Great Mother has spoken," she said.

"Right," I said. "Absolutely." You didn't argue with the Great Mother.

Berthold stood up, lifted his leather sack, and held it out to me. "Let's be off then, shall we, Doder?"

I took the sack. It was filled with crocks, and the crocks were filled with mead. And so, usually, was Berthold.

Outside, I took a deep breath of fresh air. It wasn't as fresh as it might have been, because Bob and his fumes were traveling alongside me, but it was still better than the air inside Marta's cave. Berthold walked on the other side of Bob, sipping now and then from one of his crocks.

"Tell me something, Bob," he said. "Before the lion killed Tammy, had it bothered any of you?"

"No," said Bob. "Tammy was the first."

"And how large a lion is it?"

"Huge, man. At least eight feet long. You should see the tracks."

"Have you actually seen the lion itself?"

"Nope. No one has, except Leo."

"If my memory serves me, Bob, Leo is blind."

"Well, yeah, sure," said Bob, "in the sense that he can't see anything. But he's a soothsayer, right? And he's an expert on lions. He saw it in a vision."

"Ah. But no one has observed the lion visually?"

"Nope. For one thing, it only shows up at night, when we're all asleep. And for another thing, it's *magical*."

"Magical, in what way?"

"It can disappear whenever it wants to. We've tried to trick it, man. But the tracks lead down to the river and then disappear. Leo says it's a ghost lion."

"I see." He drained the last of the mead. "Doder?" Reaching back around Bob, he handed me the empty crock. "Another, please."

"You should talk to Leo," Bob told him.

"Indeed," said Berthold.

I handed Berthold another crock. That was my share of this particular division of labor.

He pulled the cork, handed that to me, and took a drink from the crock. "Have you left Art's body as you found it?" he asked Bob.

"Sure. Everyone wanted to bury it, but I figured you'd want to see it first." Like us, the Outlanders believe that death was conta-

gious and like us, they buried a body as soon as it became one—said a quick word or two, “Nice fellow, too bad,” and then planted it as deep as possible.

“Excellent,” said Berthold, and took another drink of mead.

We crossed the mastodon tracks and came to the river, and we walked alongside that for a while. It was a beautiful day, one of those bright polished days that Memory, in recollection, is always multiplying. The sun was shining, the sky was blue, the grasses in the meadows were shimmering. The breeze was warm and gentle, and it was probably sweet too; but with Bob walking beside me, I had no way of knowing.

It took us nearly four hours to reach the Outlander village, but I could smell it after three and a half. Even with Bob walking beside me.

As we approached it, we came upon an old male Outlander sitting on the riverbank, a fishing pole in his hand. Fishing poles were another Outlander improvement over the traditional way of doing things. The traditional way meant standing in the stream with your hands dangling in the water and waiting for a fish to swim between them and surrender. Not a lot of them did, usually.

He had a big head of hair for an Outlander, a bushy white mane. It swung along the shoulders of his red plaid shirt as he turned to face us. I saw that his eyes were as white as his hair.

Bob said something in Outlander gibberish, and the old male responded in kind.

“This is Leo,” Bob told me. “He’s our lion guy.”

Berthold could speak Outlandish, and he did so now. The old male’s empty eyes widened, and he babbled something in return, and the two of them were chattering merrily away. Berthold claimed that Outlandish was a beautiful language, precise and elegant, but to me it always sounded like a box of pebbles tumbling down a hillside.

“They’re talking about the lion,” Bob told me.

The old male was doing more than talking now. He was making claws with his hands and sweeping them through the air. He was growling. He was hunching his shoulders and glowering right and left, his teeth bared, and then he was making claws with his hands again. Like Bob, he wore a bracelet, but his was made of lion’s claws, six or seven of them that rattled as he waved his arms.

It was a fine performance, and it lasted for about ten minutes. Berthold stood there, watching, sipping from time to time at his crock. Every so often Bob would translate a scrap of the old male’s monologue for me. “It lives in caves at the center of the earth . . . It’s angry at us because we don’t offer it enough sacrifices . . . It’ll kill anybody who tries to find it . . .”

Terrific, I thought.

Finally, the old Outlander's energy, or maybe just his story, ran out. Berthold said something else. The old male grinned, leaned forward, reached into the water, and pulled out a length of rope. Attached to the end of it was a flopping yellow fish, about two feet long. Berthold said something. The old male nodded proudly, then added a few more bits of cheerful gibberish.

"He wants to know," Bob explained to me, "if we'll all join him for dinner."

"Not if he's serving that fish," said Berthold. "It's a kraydon, and deadly poisonous."

"Yeah, I know," said Bob. "He thinks it's a trout. One of the twins will switch it on him before they cook it."

"The twins?" said Berthold.

"His daughters. Geena and Leena. They're the village virgins."

"Village virgins?" That was me, making my first contribution to the conversation.

"Yeah. They're sacred. They're going to get sacrificed next year."

"Sacrificed?" I said. "*Virgins?*"

"Right," said Bob. "To the thunder god. For the crops."

"But that's—*ouch!*" Berthold had kicked me in the shin.

"That's what?" said Bob.

"Doder meant to say, That's wonderful," said Berthold. "And personally, I think that dinner would be a splendid idea. Now, Bob, suppose you show us to Art's house."

The last time I visited the village, lively Outlanders were milling enthusiastically about, stinking the place up, naturally, but looking very colorful in their red plaid shirts, laughing and sporting with each other in that childish way they have, which Berthold always found charming and which I always found, well, childish. Today, however, the village seemed deserted. The death of three of your neighbors within a week can put a damper on your enthusiasm, even if you're an Outlander.

Art the Archer's house was on the edge of the community. Like the others, it was a rambling wooden structure. At one side was a small, fenced-in enclosure that held a threadbare goat and a very tired-looking ram. Both of them eyed us suspiciously as we walked up to the front door. By this time, I was breathing entirely through my mouth.

One of the Outlanders was standing guard at the door, a short stabbing spear resting on his red plaid shoulder. He gibbered at Bob. Bob gibbered back and then turned to me. "He's asking when they can bury him."

Berthold said something to the guard, and the guard looked from Berthold to Bob, shrugged, and stepped aside for us to enter.

Inside, the place was a mess. Like all Outlandish furniture, the stuff in Art's house was made from wood, and his chairs and tables and cabinets had been crushed and smashed, their fragments scattered around. And, as Bob had said, fragments of Art had been scattered around too. Most of him was lying in the corner, naked, curled into a stiff, ragged ball, torn and clawed, but bits and pieces of him dotted the walls, the floor, and even, in a few places, the ceiling. Flies were buzzing everywhere, tipsy, astonished at their good luck.

Berthold crossed the floor and squatted down beside the body. "Doder?" he said, holding up his empty crock.

I pulled out another crock, pulled out its cork, stepped across the room, and exchanged it for the empty one. I slipped the empty into the sack.

Berthold took a sip of mead. "What impresses you most about the body?" Berthold asked me.

"Well," I said. "For one thing, it's very dead."

He frowned sourly. "An extremely astute observation."

He glanced across the room. "What's that?" he asked, and stood and strode across the room to a shattered cabinet. Squatting down again, he lifted away some chunks of wood and revealed three golden figurines. The Outlanders were fond of gold figurines, and even I knew that each one of them possessed a few. These were about two inches tall. One was a fish, one was a crab, and one was a scorpion.

Berthold turned to Bob. "Are these the only figurines that Art owned?"

"He kept pretty much to himself," said Bob. "I liked Art, but I didn't know much about him. You could talk to Bill, Tammy's husband. He and Bob used to hang out together. But why're you asking, man? A lion wouldn't bother with a figurine."

"Not unless, as Leo says, it was some sort of ghost lion." He stood. "Where are the tracks you mentioned?"

"This way," said Bob, who led us out of the room and through the kitchen to a back door. "This was open," he said, "when Lou found the body." He opened the door and pointed to the ground. The earth was hard, worn down by many years of passage, but you could make out the pads of a lion's feet and the deep indentations of its claws.

"A large one, eh, Doder?" said Berthold.

Large was an understatement. The lion that made those tracks had been enormous. "We're not really going to track this thing?" I asked him.

"Not as yet. Bob, where exactly is Bill's house?"

"I can show you," said Bob.

"Thank you, but that won't be necessary. I know you must have things to do. If you'll tell me where it is, I'm sure that Doder and I can find it."

"Okay, sure. Is it all right to bury him now?"

"Certainly. Will we see you at Leo's house for dinner?"

"Sure." And then Bob gave us directions, and Berthold and I set out for Bill's house.

As soon as we were out of earshot, Berthold said to me, "Doder, in the future, unless I ask for your opinion, please keep it to yourself."

"What? You mean that thing about virgins?"

"Exactly. It's not a good idea to ridicule someone else's religion."

"Sacrificing a virgin? That's a religion?"

"How is their sacrifice any different from ours? At the next Vernal Equinox, we'll be sacrificing Gunnar."

"Yeah, sure," I said, "but that's the way things are *supposed* to happen. I mean, Gunnar's a *man*. We're talking about virgins here, two of them. All right, they're Outlanders. But still, it's an incredible waste."

"I understand your feelings. But I'd prefer that, when anyone else is present, you keep them, and your opinions, to yourself."

"Fine," I said. "Fine."

"I'll have another crock, please." He handed me the empty one.

No one else was present, so I ventured an opinion. "You're going through those crocks pretty quickly."

"This is at least a three-crock problem," he said.

I handed him another crock.

Bill's house was near the center of the village, just off the central square. It was a bit larger than Art's and in better shape. In the enclosure at its side stood a gigantic gray bull. It glowered at us from beneath a colossal pair of horns as we approached. Just outside the house's front door was a large set of weighing scales.

"What are those for?" I asked Berthold.

"Bill is the tax collector," he said. "In exchange for a percentage of crops, the Outlanders receive an equal weight of manure from that animal," he nodded toward the bull, "to fertilize the fields for next year."

"They hand over part of what they make, and they get bull manure in return?"

"Yes."

"And that's what they call 'agriculture'?"

"No," he said. "They call that 'politics'."

"How come you know so much about them?" I asked him. "The Outlanders."

"They intrigue me. Their enthusiasm, their love of technology. They are, I believe, the wave of the future."

"And what does that make us?"

He smiled another cryptic smile. "The wave of the past."

"You're kidding."

"As you ought to know by now, Doder," he said, "I never kid."

On that breezy note, we climbed up the steps and Berthold knocked at the door. After a moment, it was opened by a short Outlander male who wore the usual plaid shirt, but this one was gray rather than red. Berthold said something in Outlandish, and the male stood back and gestured for us to come in.

The interior of the "living room" was like the interior of the similar room in Art's house, but without the damage. Berthold and the Outlander chattered for a while, and then the Outlander led us back through a corridor to what was apparently a sleeping chamber.

Here, damage had been done. On the sleeping box lay a stained and torn cloth mattress, tufts of straw poking through ragged rents in the material. Deep scratches ran along the wooden wall. More dark stains covered the wooden floor.

Jabbering away, the Outlander walked to the window and opened it. Berthold asked him something, and the Outlander frowned, then went to a cabinet against the far wall and opened that. He reached in and pulled out a pair of small gold figurines, a goat and a bull. Berthold asked him some questions, the man answered them.

Berthold said something else, and the Outlander lowered his head and kept it there for a moment. When he raised it, a few tears were trickling down his cheek.

Berthold jabbered a few more words and the Outlander nodded.

Berthold turned to me. "Come along, Doder."

Outside, he handed me his empty crock. I took it, handed him a new one, and asked him, "That was Bill, Tammy's husband?"

"Yes."

"How come the lion didn't kill him too?"

"He was away, visiting relatives in another village."

"Lucky for him."

Berthold turned to me. "He lost his wife, Doder."

"Oh," I said. "Right." Berthold wasn't married, of course.

He took a thoughtful sip of mead.

"Did you find out anything else?" I asked him.

"One or two things. One of which is suggestive, and may even be crucial."

"Yeah? Like what?"

"All in good time." He was like that, Berthold, very secretive. By this point, as I later learned, he knew pretty much exactly what

had gone on in the village. You'd think that he'd be willing to share his knowledge with the person who was carting around that damned sack of his.

But no. "First," he said, "we must speak with the relatives of Wally the Water Bearer."

And so we spoke to the relatives of Wally the Water Bearer, his aunt and uncle, inside their house, and a lot more jabbering went on. They hauled out some more gold figurines and jabbered some more, and then Berthold and I left.

"What is it with the figurines?" I asked him when we got back outside. "Why do the Outlanders keep them?"

"They represent constellations of stars. The Outlanders believe that the stars, and particular groupings of them, can affect our lives."

"How? They're just little pinholes in the Great Mother's Evening Gown."

"The Outlanders have a somewhat different belief system."

"I'll say. How come you keep asking about the figurines?"

"Each of the dead Outlanders had a collection of them. From each collection a figurine was missing."

"From Art's too?"

"Yes, according to Bill."

"Well, obviously," I said, "the lion didn't take them."

He smiled. "Obviously," he said, "the lion did."

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"All—"

"Yeah, right, all in good time."

"Patience, Doder."

Easy for him to say. He wasn't carrying twenty crocks of mead.

"Come," he said. "We must interview a few more Outlanders."

Which we did, three or four of them in different parts of the village. More jabbering. Finally, when we got outside the last of the houses, Berthold turned to me and said, "I believe it's time for dinner."

"You're really going to eat, in the middle of all this stink?"

"Food isn't the only thing that's served-at dinner."

"Yeah? What else is?"

"Sometimes," he said with a cryptic smile, "the Truth."

The Truth, just then, was that I wanted to take a swing at him with the sack.

The house of Leo, the lion expert, was an old one, far from the riverbank where we first met him. When we knocked on the door, it was Bob who opened it.

"Hey, man," he said to Berthold. "Come on in. How's it going?"

Leo's house, inside, was pretty much the same as all the others, except that in here, standing beside a large dining table, there was a pair of twins. They were identical young females with identically long black hair, and they wore bracelets of lion claws, spotless leather pants, and freshly washed red plaid shirts. They were slender and sleek, and I suppose that from an Outlandish point of view they were fairly attractive. Neither of them had an eyebrow ridge like Ursula's, naturally, and I've never really been fond of hairless skin. But they were handsome enough, as specimens of their species, and it seemed a pity to me that they were going to be sacrificed next year. I was pretty sure that even among the Outlanders, there weren't that many virgins around.

"It goes well, I think, Bob," said Berthold. "And these are, of course, the twins."

"Oh yeah. This is Geena, this is Leena."

Right away, I have to admit, they surprised me. As Bob gibbered away in Outlandish, they smiled and nodded. The one on the left, Geena, said slowly but clearly, hesitating only a little, "Hey . . . man." The one on the right, Leena, said, "What . . . is . . . happening?"

Berthold smiled. "Congratulations. Your accents are excellent."

"Thanks . . . man," said Geena.

"We speak four . . . distinct . . . languages," said Leena.

"And all of them extremely well, I'm sure," said Berthold.

"Dinner is nearly . . . ready," said Geena.

"We've got to go . . . help Dad in the kitchen," said Leena.

"We'll be right back," said Geena.

As they left, Bob turned to Berthold and said, "So. When do we start stalking the lion, man?"

"I have been stalking it," said Berthold, "since I arrived here."

"Huh?"

"All in good time, Bob."

Just then, Leo entered the room and gave a hearty gibberish shout of greeting. Grinning hugely, moving here in his own home as though he weren't blind at all, he came around the table and offered his hand to Berthold, who shook it enthusiastically with his own, and then to me, who shook it. When no one was looking, I wiped mine clean on the curtain.

We all sat down at the table, and the young women served the food. There was salad and fish (trout now, not the poisonous kraydon). Throughout the meal, the conversation was mostly small talk. The young women demonstrated their facility with The Language. Berthold and Leo jabbered away. Bob asked me why I wasn't eating, and I told him that I'd eaten a large lunch.

It was during dessert—cookies and milk, which I also couldn't eat—that Berthold sat back against his chair and said to Leena, "Tell me, Leena. Which of you killed your neighbors, you or your sister?"

Bob, whose mouth was filled with milk, promptly spat it out across the table. No one was sitting opposite him, fortunately.

"Come again?" said Leena, looking confused.

"It had to be one of you," said Berthold. "One of you was seen shortly after each of the murders. None of the witnesses thought anything of it—after all, the victims were killed by a lion."

"Hey, man," said Bob. "You've got to be kidding."

"As Doder will tell you, I never kid. Doder—?"

"He never kids," I said.

Berthold frowned impatiently. "Doder, when you told Marta you were allergic to cats, you were speaking the truth, were you not?"

"Absolutely." You didn't lie to the Great Mother's representative.

"How allergic are you?"

"Very. I get hives if I go into a room where a cat *used* to be."

"And yet this afternoon, when you were in a house that had apparently been visited by a lion, you had no reaction at all."

"Well, no," I admitted. I glanced over at Leena and Geena, who were exchanging puzzled looks.

"Hey, man," said Bob. "Those marks on Art's body and the others. They were made with *claws*."

"Yes," said Berthold. "By those claws—" he pointed to Leena's bracelet. "Or by those—" he pointed to Geena's. "As were the lion tracks outside Art's house in the earth."

Old Leo frowned, maybe sensing that the meal wasn't working out. He cocked his head and gibbered something.

"But those were *lion* tracks," said Bob.

"Either twin would have known what lion tracks look like, and how to duplicate them. Their father is, after all, the local authority on lions. Tell me this, Bob. If it was a lion who killed your neighbors, why didn't the beast eat them?"

"Well, uh . . ."

"None of the victims had been eaten. No parts had been taken. A few had been redistributed, yes. But none had been removed. No, Bob. One of the sisters killed your friends and made the death look like the work of a lion."

"Why?"

"So no one would suspect her true motive."

"Which was what?"

"Theft. The theft of a gold figurine. One was stolen from each victim."

Leo gibbered something, turning his head left and right.

Bob patted him on the back impatiently and asked Berthold, "Why steal a figurine?"

"To provide herself with finances."

"But neither one of them *needs* finances, man. They're sacred, both of them. So long as they're here, they get everything they want."

"Yes. So long as they're here in your village. But if one of them wanted to leave?"

"But why would either one of them want to?"

"To avoid being sacrificed."

Bob shook his head. "Oh no, man. That can't be right. Being sacrificed, man, that's an *honor*."

Berthold smiled. "On that matter, Bob, one of the sisters disagrees with you."

"But sacrifice is a great honor," said Geena.

"A great honor," echoed Leena.

Leo gibbered. Bob patted him again and said to Berthold, "Okay, okay, look. I'm not saying you're right. But what makes you so sure it was *one* of them and not both of them?"

"Only one of the twins was ever seen."

"What," I asked, "if they took turns?" I was pretty pleased with myself for coming up with this.

"Absurd," said Berthold. "If both were involved, they would have worked together at making the deaths seem the result of a lion attack. Two people would have been able to claw the bodies, falsify those tracks more quickly. And both twins, in that case, would have been seen afterward. But in fact, only one was seen."

He turned to Bob. "The question is, which one? And I believe I know of a simple method by which that might be determined."

"What's that?"

"You need merely place both of them in a locked room for a period of twenty-four hours, under close supervision. You see, I believe—"

"We can't do that," Bob told him.

Berthold blinked in surprise. "Why not?"

"They're sacred, man. Chosen by the thunder god. We can't do that. Lock them up. Supervise them. Not unless they break a rule."

"One of them *has* broken a rule. She's killed three of your people."

"That's what *you* say. You don't have any proof."

Leo gibbered loudly, almost a growl. Bob snapped something in Outlandish.

Berthold looked across the table at the two young females. They looked calmly back. If one of them were secretly gloating, she gave no sign of it.

Still staring at the women, Berthold said, "Bob, the villagers with whom I spoke told me that the sacredness of Leena and Geena resides entirely in their twinhood. Is that true?"

"Sure. If they weren't twins, identical and all, they'd just be normal women."

"I should think then, that the two of them, both honored to be chosen for sacrifice, would make an effort to remain identical."

"Naturally. Didn't you see the way they ate? If one of them takes a bite of fish, then the other takes exactly the same sized bite. If one of them eats two cookies, so does the other."

"Ah." Suddenly Berthold smiled at the females. "You both claim to be innocent, is that correct?"

"Absolutely," said the two of them in unison.

"Then neither of you would object to a small experiment that will serve to establish that innocence."

The females looked at each other, looked back at him. "Not me," said Leena. "Not me," said Geena.

"Excellent. Let us all retire then to Bill's house."

A few minutes later, we all stood outside Bill's house. Along the way, Bob had explained the situation to Leo, who was now gibbering angrily and waving his arms. Bob was trying to quiet him.

The sight of the twins, or maybe the sight of Berthold and me in their presence, had drawn a small crowd. They gathered in a semi-circle around us, muttering in gibberish.

Berthold walked over to the large set of scales set up beside the front door. "Geena. Please step on one side of the scale."

Geena looked at her sister and then walked forward. The scales held two wooden plates, each suspended on ropes. Geena grasped the ropes on one side, lowered the plate they held, and stepped gingerly onto it. The plate sank to the ground.

"Leena," said Berthold. "Please step on the other."

Leena hesitated. She glanced around at the crowd.

Berthold smiled. "This will take only a moment."

Leena walked over, grabbed the second set of ropes, and stepped onto the second plate. As she sank slightly, her sister was lifted from the ground. For a moment or two, swaying slightly back and forth, the two females rose and fell in turn.

Between the two plates was an upright wooden rod that swung back and forth before a curved beam. Along the beam, at regular intervals, were lines carefully painted on the wood, to indicate by how much the items being measured might differ in weight. It was a clever piece of equipment. But, as I've said, the Outlanders were very clever fellows.

We watched as the two females bobbed for a bit, one going up as the other went down. The rod swung left and right.

No one spoke now. Bob had somehow managed to silence Leo.

At last the females, and the rod, stopped moving. The rod pointed very slightly to the left of center.

Leena weighed a fraction more than her sister.

Before any of us, except Berthold, realized what this meant, Leena leaped from her plate. Her sister shot to the ground, her knees buckling beneath her, as Leena sprang toward the street.

Bob grabbed her. She swung a fist at him. He caught that and twisted it up behind her back. Wrapping his left arm around her neck, he said to Berthold, "What? What is it?"

Geena had gotten up from the ground. She ran now to her father, who was beginning to gibber again.

"There was one thing that could ruin Leena's plan," said Berthold. "One thing that, if found, would instantly reveal her guilt."

"What?"

"The last figurine. The one she took from Art's house this morning. If the figurine were found on her person, she would be lost."

"She swallowed it," I said.

Berthold looked at me, surprised. And then he smiled. "Very good, Doder." He turned back to Bob. "She did, indeed, swallow it. If you will place her in confinement for a day or so, sooner or later the figurine—"

"I get you," said Bob, struggling to hold on to Leena. "The figurine will, uh, show up."

"Exactly."

And it did, too, as Berthold told me the next day.

The figurine, as it happened, was in the shape of a lion.

Berthold got a big kick out of that. He thought it was very ironic. He liked irony, Berthold.

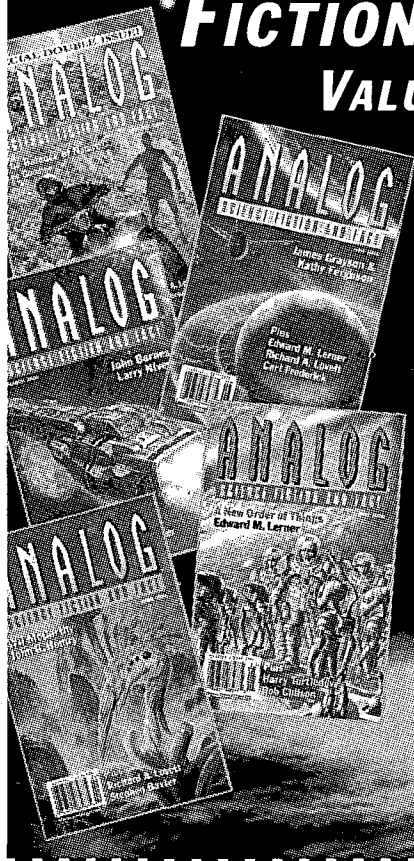
But for me, the best part of the story was that it had a happy ending. Not for Leena, of course. Because she was beheaded and buried before breakfast the next morning. But for Geena. With Leena gone, she was no longer a twin, and the Outlanders had to forget about sacrificing her.

No, I don't know what happened to her. Within a few months, my poor wife, Ursula, was dead and I was on my way to—

But that's another story.

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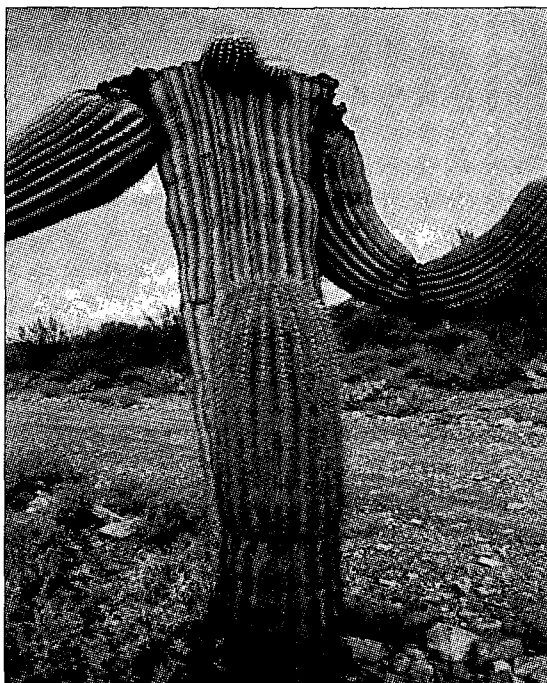
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MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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A Prickly Figure

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

DEATH OF A MENTOR

SUSAN OLEKSIW

Anita Ray scuffed along in her rubber sandals. The long shadow that overlapped hers kept a steady ten feet behind her until she came to the police substation, its door and windows still shuttered in the early morning light. Sunrise was sudden in South India and was only minutes away. Anita swung around. An old man jumped away from her, his hands grabbing the ends of his dirty *lungi*.

"Is it you, Panditji?" Anita threw back her shoulders and stuck her hands on her hips. Her camera bounced against her chest, her plans for an early morning shoot forgotten. "You have been following me since I left Hotel Delite a half hour ago. What are you up to? Didn't you know it was me?"

"Of course I knew," the old man said, shrugging. "But doubt is in my mind. Your aunt hates me. I am worrying she has turned you against me."

"You are a foolish old man!" Anita grinned at him. "Come, let us find a place for coffee." They walked until they came to a tea stall just opening up. "You must have a serious problem, Panditji, if you have come all this way to see me."

"I am going to prison for murder! Murder, memsahib, murder!"

Anita could hardly believe her ears. Panditji had always been the most inoffensive of palm readers—he was so frail and brittle looking that a dissatisfied customer could just pick him up and snap him in two if he or she felt like it. "Murder? Really, Panditji, if the police meant to arrest you for murder, would they have let you travel all the way down here to see me?"

His stubbly chin trembled as he began to speak. "A man has died and it is because of me. You are the only one who can help."

"Tell me what has happened."

The tale was bizarre. Panditji and his wife lived in a tiny house in the hills with their daughter and her husband. Life was hard, but they were happy for the most part. At the time of the marriage, Panditji ignored the custom of his caste of handing over

property to his daughter and, instead, held onto everything. After a while, the resentment grew.

"I am not a trusting old man," he explained.

"If you had reservations about this son-in-law," Anita said, "why did you let the marriage go forward?"

Panditji shrugged. "My daughter wants this—a love match—but I have seen his hand. He is a man who wants his freedom."

"Go on," Anita said.

The son-in-law began to complain that Panditji kept all the money everyone in the family earned, and that was the same as stealing from them. Then one day Panditji's wife complained that pieces of her jewelry were missing. Panditji inspected the jewelry box and went straight to his son-in-law and accused him, but the boy insisted he had not stolen anything. Unable to bully him into a confession, Panditji sought out K.R.S. Elavan, a *mantrakara*, a magician known for his effective spells. Elavan came to the house, had every member of the household eat holy ashes, and then waited. No one confessed. He performed a second *puja*. Still nothing happened. "I had to send him away, and everyone in the village laughed at me, except my wife, who is still angry; she wants her jewelry back." He snorted and lifted his dirty cotton shirt to better scratch at skin hanging off him like worn tree bark.

"Where does murder come into all this?"

"Late at night," Panditji said, taking her question literally. "Everyone was angry then. My wife refused to make a meal, my daughter and her husband quarreled, and he went off to the arrack shop."

"Have you grandchildren?" Anita asked

He shook his head. "Not a one."

"Oh dear," Anita said. "Well, go on with your story."

"That night, when my son-in-law returned and went to spread out his mat to sleep in the corner with my daughter, I told him he would not get away with this. He said nothing, barely looking at me, like a drunken man."

"Was he drunk?"

"I guess so. He often goes to the arrack shop in the evening, but my daughter, Reki, is so besotted with him she never complains. When he comes home late, she gives him a meal or a massage or a song. Not a word of reproach from her."

"Is that what happened the night he died?"

He nodded. "She gave him a massage, and I went back to sleep."

"Then what happened?"

"In the middle of the night I awoke to hear my daughter sobbing and wailing. I thought the spell had worked, but no, she was

wailing over her husband's dead body. The neighbors called the police when they heard all the noise." He began to scratch his belly.

"You know, Auntie Meena, I think it is time I took a little vacation to some other parts of Kerala," Anita said as she walked with her older relative toward the hotel. Her aunt had been negotiating with a taxi driver for a group of guests and was preoccupied with rupees per meter and the costs of petrol. "I'll be gone for several days."

"Several days?" Meena stopped by the steps leading into the hotel compound. "But—"

"Just think, Auntie. Three days without me offending the guests, or messing up your office, like last time." Meena blanched at the memory of Anita relocating guests to other hotels so she could open up the annex to a group of stranded nuns.

"Is there any chance you'll be getting a job?" This is what Anita's family forever hoped for—a legitimate job, one that did not involve the Hindu-American woman wandering around the country with only a camera and no sign of respectable occupation.

"I'm going to visit Panditji's family." Anita was about to ask her aunt if she remembered the old man, but the look on Meena's face answered that question.

"He took my palm and told me I have a *seera* mark! Me, a *seera* mark! Am I a nervous person, Anita? I ask you! I am never nervous! Never!" Meena began to chew her left pinkie. "You!" She caught sight of Panditji and picked up a pebble and threw it at him.

"It is fate," the old man whined.

"Do you think you know more than my astrologer?" Meena leaned over to glare at him.

"I think I know far less," he said. "He is wise enough not to get stones thrown at him." Pebbles flew at his legs.

Panditji sat limp and silent on the long ride up to the hill village of Arayanakkam, no matter how Anita tried to engage him in conversation. She was fond of the old man, and eager to tell him about her recent investigations. Certainly, there were few enough she could talk to about her bad habits, as her aunt called them. Sometimes, when she began to wonder about an unexplained death, she found herself rubbing her thumb over the middle digit of her left index finger, the *Devi* sign that had convinced Panditji that she would find answers that eluded others.

Panditji's house had fared no better than he had. The compound

wall was streaked with dirt and grime from past monsoons, dead banana trees were piled up alongside one wall, the gate hung precariously on its hinges, and a dog sprawled in the noonday heat, too beaten down to growl or even lift its head.

"You can hear them from here," Panditji said. Anita listened. Sure enough, she heard the wails of a young woman and the cries and voices of others, the clattering of pots and the general racket of a house in disarray. The old man showed no intention of entering. Anita dragged him inside.

The midday meal was an awkward affair. Anita and Panditji sat in the middle of a small eating room, banana leaves on the ground in front of them, while Chennamma, Panditji's wife, and her daughter, Reki, and a maidservant came in and out with various dishes. Chennamma hovered in the doorway, alternately telling Reki to stop sniveling and telling Anita about the neighbors and how hard her life had become with an old man whose reputation for incisive palm-readings was failing. When the meal was at an end for everyone, Anita found Chennamma on the back veranda directing the maidservant in her duties.

"A useless girl, she is," Chennamma said. "Like all the young ones. I teach her and beat her and still she gets it all wrong. What is an old woman to do?" The maidservant gave her a smug smile.

"Tell me about your jewelry," Anita said, leading the woman away from the veranda.

"Heh? My jewelry? I was robbed. What more is there to know?"

"Gold bangles? Gold necklace? The usual things?"

"Exactly so. Nothing special, just some of my gold bangles. I have little left after all these years. Didn't I pawn a bangle last year to put on a new roof? And now I have even less."

Anita nodded. She could see Chennamma in line in a bank along with other women, young and old, watching their necklaces and bangles being weighed in return for house loans, school loans, car loans, and other purposes. Anita could usually pick out the women there to pawn jewelry; they were the best dressed among all the customers, as though their appearance could counteract the taint of the transaction. "Can you describe the pieces that were stolen?"

"The standard bangle from the goldsmith," she said.

"So whoever has it can sell it or keep it, and you'll never be able to recognize it," Anita said.

"Yes, sadly so. Probably whoever it is has already sold it," she said with a dramatic sigh.

"Tell me about your daughter and her marriage," Anita said, switching topics. "Your son-in-law's name was Moonu?"

"What is there to tell? He had a degree. If his family had money he could have gone on to college, but still, he had a degree from the district school."

"What sort of job did he have?"

"He worked in a timber yard, in the office. Assistant to the second bookkeeper." Chennamma was very proud of this title and repeated it twice for Anita's benefit.

"That is a good job," Anita said, watching the other woman preen. "And good pay too."

Chennamma's hands fell still, and she glanced over her shoulder. "Let us walk over here." She led the way to the back of the yard, where no compound wall separated the family grounds from the tangled woods going up the hill.

"Your husband has told me there was dissension in the family," Anita said.

"My son-in-law was a good man, he was. Moonu only wanted to have his home with my daughter, but he was not happy with how my husband treated him. Panditji went to Moonu's employer and told him to give him the paycheck, not to Moonu. Panditji is a respected man in these parts," she said, stopping to let that sink in. "So the yard owner said yes, he would do so. So every week Panditji goes to pick up the paycheck."

"How did Moonu feel about this?" Anita asked.

Chennamma pulled a face. "The things they said to each other!"

"What about your daughter? Does she also have a job?"

"She sweeps at the doctor's office, and there too Panditji collects her paycheck." She sighed. "It is right that they contribute to the household. It was to be their house, not ours, but they did not like the way Panditji went about it."

"Did Moonu threaten to do anything?"

Chennamma slapped her hands against her cheeks. "Oy; he accused Panditji of stealing his money! And my daughter! Her father is destroying her marriage, she says."

Anita poked her head into the small room, but Reki, Panditji's daughter and the new widow, was snoring softly. Although the family usually slept in the large front room, Reki had been allowed to set up a private room after her husband's death, in part to keep her from startling the household with her sudden outbursts.

"Maybe later she will wake up and talk to you."

Anita turned around at the sound of the maidservant's voice. The woman was holding a shallow square basket of fresh vegetables just taken from the storeroom. "You are Poota, aren't you? Have you worked here long?"

"I came as a little girl, when I was eight or nine. My mother lives in Tinnevely, if she is still alive."

"Don't you know?"

Poota shrugged. "She sends me a card every year at Onam, and I send her one too. I don't know from year to year, but I don't care so much anymore."

"Do you like working here?" Anita asked. Poota shrugged again. "Where do you sleep?"

"Outside the storeroom." She nodded to a door standing ajar, where Anita could see a rolled mat leaning against the wall and a cloth bag hanging from a peg.

Anita wandered into the storeroom and looked over the items on the shelves; the pantry was well stocked, and reminded her of her grandmother's storeroom when she was a little girl—full of bottles with strange-colored liquids and dried roots and other things.

"What's this?" Anita asked.

"Chennamma's chutney," Poota said.

"And this?"

Poota peered at it. "Some of the oil mixture Reki uses for massage."

"And this?" Anita pulled a bottle from the very far corner of the lowest shelf.

"Poison that is saved for animals that come in the dry season." Poota studied her. "I think it is not enough to kill a person."

Anita found the *mantrakara* tending a tapioca plot behind his small house. He moved bent over from plant to plant, and Anita followed along beside him, both silent, biding their time. All of a sudden he straightened up.

"I have heard about you. Panditji is very proud to know you, but," he said, reaching out his arm to point at her, "you will not find a murderer here. The boy died because he was guilty! I know what I am saying. Guilty! The ashes never lie!" The speech was delivered with great passion and volume, but the *mantrakara's* eyes told a different story. He was about Panditji's age, but larger and far better fed, his round belly smooth from frequent oil baths.

"Aren't the ashes supposed to make a guilty person confess?"

"Exactly what they do!"

"But Moonu didn't confess; he died."

The *mantrakara* waved away this objection and turned back to his tapioca plants. "The police have found nothing—nothing."

"They're not through looking," Anita said. "Tell me exactly what you did and where you got the ashes."

"The ashes are from the temple, from the supply they make every morning. I purchase what I need and take them." The magician knelt over and scooped more dirt onto a mound.

"Did people know what you had purchased the ashes for?"

"I have many customers," he said. "I don't keep them secret but I don't tell others either. I don't know what they know."

"Okay, so you have the ashes. Then what?"

"I go to Panditji's house and prepare a *puja*. I recite the mantras for making a sinner confess. I recite the mantras over the family members, each one, and then I give them the ashes. I do this again."

"Did you have any help there, at the house?"

"What sort of help would I want?" he asked.

"I don't know. Did Panditji give you water for mixing the ashes? Did Reki help you mix the ashes? Did Chennamma offer you plates to use?"

He shook his head. "No one is helping me. I am giving the ashes with the mantras. No one is strong enough to confess."

"Strong enough?"

"A *preta* can keep someone from confessing. It is well known. There must be a *preta* in the house making someone do evil."

"Panditji has never mentioned any kind of ghost or spirit troubling his family," Anita pointed out.

"Does he know everything?"

"He would know that," Anita said.

"You know he is ruined. No one will come to him now. There is a murder in his house, and he cannot identify how it happened or who did it. Who will trust him now?"

During supper that evening Anita kept a close eye on the women cooking and serving the meal. She had not yet had a chance to speak with Reki, and Poota had grown sullen and moody, deflecting all of Anita's questions about dinner on the night Moonu died.

The meal was modest—plain *vadai* soaked in yogurt along with some vegetables. As Anita sipped her chai later, she watched the other women cleaning up. Because the house was so small, the women were constantly bumping into each other while they worked, and no one could have added a poison to one person's meal without others noticing. Anita took her cup and saucer into the kitchen and deposited them onto the stone counter. Outside the back door she could see a figure moving toward the house. It was Reki.

Anita waited for the young woman to return from the outside latrine. "I am so sorry about your husband's death. You were only married two years, yes?"

"Barely two years." She dropped her arms to her sides and stared sullenly at the floor, her face a mask of distress. "Not long enough."

"And no children?"

She shook her head.

"Your father told me what a devoted wife you were," Anita said, hoping for some reaction.

"I did everything a wife is to do." She spoke with a dullness that Anita attributed to the shock of her husband's death; but then, all of a sudden, she became animated. "Did I not tend to his pain? Did I not tell him stories and jokes when he was bored? Did I not make his favorite foods? Did I not come to him without calling?"

A breeze rustled the bushes near the compound wall, and the night grew cooler. "Were you happy living here? The two of you?"

"Where else would we live?"

"He was happy with his job?"

"It was a good job," she said, leaning back against the counter. "Enough for us, the two of us."

"It is how he died that confuses me most," Anita said. "I don't understand what happened. Tell me how it went."

Reki crossed her arms over her waist, her worn, red-bordered white sari reflecting the moonlight, her eyes suspicious and dark. She pulled the end of the sari around her shoulders against the evening chill and let her gaze drift around the room. Panditji and her mother had settled on the front veranda and were engaged in one of their many bickerings; Poota was nowhere in sight.

"The *mantrakara* performed his *puja*, but no one was guilty of stealing someone else's jewelry," she said with a sneer, "so he had to leave. He was disgraced."

"What happened after that?" Anita was taken with her defiance; it was so different from her histrionic display of sorrow earlier in the day.

"We had our supper—lentils and puris, very simple. And then we are sleeping. At midnight my husband whispers to me that he is unwell. And then he is dead."

"Just like that?"

"Yes, madame detective, just like that!" She burst into tears and ran from the room.

The Ganesh Timber Works lay along a main road leading down to Trivandrum, next to a long, one-story building housing a number of new shops. Anita strolled up the hard-packed dirt road to the small, whitewashed office. It was early, and although workers were preparing to move huge tree trunks into the sawmill area, the office was closed. She kicked at a pile of wood chips and the air

was filled with the fragrance of freshly cut wood.

"You are looking for someone?" A stocky man in a white shirt and white *lungi* greeted her from among the timber. "Office is not opening until ten o'clock." Anita explained her business. He shook his head and scurried around the logs. "A terrible thing, yes, terrible."

"What sort of employee was he?"

"The ordinary sort. Reliable, steady, eager to advance, but not too bright. Young but able."

"Good enough," Anita said. "Did he ever say he had trouble at home?"

The man stifled a laugh. "We should all have such trouble at home."

"Meaning what?"

"Such a devoted wife he had. She came here a few times, just to bring him a meal or a sweater when it was cold, or to clean his office or help where she could."

"I've heard she was devoted," Anita said. He went on laughing. "Why is that so funny?"

"You are Panditji's friend who is part American? I have a cousin in Chikagoo and he tells me the expressions of your people."

"Such as?"

"Closing the barn door after the horse has run away." He seemed to think this was hilarious and slapped his leg while he laughed.

"It's an old expression, yes," Anita replied.

"But you live in skyscrapers! You have no horses." Suddenly he grew serious. "But that was Reki, I am thinking. She is closing the barn door but the horse is escaping."

"That's quite an accusation, if I'm understanding you correctly," she said.

"There is a reason she has no child," the man said in a near whisper. "His seed was worn out." And he went on chuckling.

The man let Anita wander around the timber yard for more than an hour while he went about readying the office to open. Other employees drifted in, and after a few words of explanation, gave her a humorous welcoming smile and went about their duties. At the end of her visit, Anita had a very good idea of how the sawmill machinery worked and was maintained, how the logs were transported and managed, and how the finished wood was shipped out. It had never occurred to her before how a chair got to be a chair, but now she knew.

The village street was just waking up to the busyness of the day when Anita left the timber yard. A bus careened past her and lumbered around a corner, spitting dust along the road. A sari vendor

spread stacks of saris across the covered floor of his small shop sitting high up on its plinth; from there he could chat with villagers passing by, calling the women to admire his wares. The bank manager lolled in the doorway, trying to stay cool until the power returned and started up the ceiling fan. He ushered Anita in and she pulled out her ATM card. Already bored, he was ready for a chat, and Anita was glad to accept a cup of tea and visit.

"We are looking and looking for you," Reki said when Anita returned to the house. "We are thinking you have gone out without your breakfast. My father was very worried. Come!" She led the way to the eating room. Anita followed without comment and settled down to a late breakfast. She was too preoccupied with her morning discoveries to notice much around her. She could feel answers forming in her mind—her stomach had that tightness that always preceded the perception of truth, and with it, the confidence that she was right.

"I have wasted your time," Panditji said, coming into the room. "You must go home. I will call for a car. Do not fret," he said holding up a hand when she tried to speak. "I shall pay."

"With what?" Anita said. "Your wife's bangles?" She heard the gasp from the kitchen doorway.

"What are you saying?" Chennamma stood transfixed. "You know where my bangles are?"

"Your husband knows." Anita waited for Panditji to deny the accusation, but of course he couldn't. She looked down at her banana leaf, at the *iddlies* and special chutney that reminded her of the many times she had enjoyed breakfast with Panditji when she was a child. "Tell us, Panditji," Anita said in a gentler tone.

"Yes, Papa, tell us." Reki stood behind her mother. "You have the bangles yet you accused my husband. All your accusations and anger drove him away. Why?"

"You don't know the truth," Panditji said to Anita. "You only think you do."

"I know enough." Anita rose, folded up the banana leaf, and passed it to Poota. Anita waited until the servant had left the room, knowing even so that the other woman would listen at the door. "You stole the bangles for the obvious reasons. The bank manager told me you brought bangles in to pawn," Anita said. "Just before Chennamma also brought in two bangles to pawn."

"You stole my bangles?" Chennamma clasped her hands over her mouth and swayed.

"You have been pawning bangles without telling me?" Panditji said in surprise.

"Both of you looked at Chennamma's pile of bangles and knew

that there should have been more, but neither one of you told the other that you had pawned bangles secretly," Anita said.

"But you accused Moonu!" Reki said, coming forward. "You almost throttled him."

"If Moonu didn't steal the bangles, why did he die after the *mantrakara's puja*? What killed him?" Chennamma asked in a whisper.

"Not what. Who," Anita said. She looked behind Chennamma, to Reki. Both parents followed her gaze.

"How can it be?" Chennamma grabbed her daughter and crushed her to her bosom. But Reki pushed her away.

"Is it true, child?" her father asked.

"You know it is," she said. "You were right about him, Papa."

Panditji sighed. "I predicted that he would complain of feeling suffocated," he explained to Anita. "He had the mark of Kambu on his left hand, the little mark by the fingernail on his little finger; sure enough, he complained that he had no freedom, no home of his own. I told him he and Reki would have this house and my land as soon as Chennamma and I were old, but it was not enough. Not for him."

"So when Chennamma found her bangles missing, you assumed it was Moonu getting ready to run away," Anita said.

"I couldn't get the mark of Kambu out of my head," Panditji said.

"But you were right!" Reki said. "He meant to leave me! He had other women!" She burst into deep, painful sobs.

"And so you killed him," Anita said. "I found the massage oil, Reki, and I have been to the timber yard and seen the small cans of carbon tetrachloride. It is used for degreasing equipment at the yard," Anita explained to Panditji. "Mix it in with massage oil in high concentrations and anyone would succumb to coma and death. Did you get him drunk first?"

Reki looked frantically from her father to her mother.

"We can test the massage oil in the pantry, Reki, and on the body," Anita said.

"He was always drinking," Reki said. "He liked to sneak out when he thought no one would notice. Off to the arrack shop and his other women and then skulking back home. Did he not see how I cared for him?"

"The police will be here soon," Anita told Panditji. "And they will not take you instead of your daughter." Panditji slumped to the ground.

The tears streamed down Chennamma's face as she stumbled after her daughter and the constable. Poota tried to bring her back

to the house. When that failed, she stood with her on the path gently holding her while the old woman stared at the empty road where her daughter had been driven away. Panditji sat on the veranda, crying softly.

"You will have to tell her," Anita said. "You both have many debts." She wanted to lay her hand on his shoulder and say, Don't worry, everything will work out. But that would be a lie. Things were going to get much worse. She took a deep breath and let her gaze wander over the compound and little house. Here she had learned to listen to her own instincts, to judge people for herself. Sitting beside Panditji as he read palms and analyzed his customers' characters, she had discerned his gift and found her own. Here she had learned to be astute, wily, silent, compassionate. And here she would learn one more lesson.

"The bank will take it all, won't they?" he said.

She nodded.

"It will not matter. My wife and I are the last of our family. I knew it would come to an end when no child was born at the end of their first year of marriage. I think Reki knew too. We will begin our wanderings, the end of our life."

"I think this will be good-bye for us too," Anita said, wishing it weren't so. ♡

Solution to the July/August "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- | | | |
|----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| A. Clodhopper | I. New Haven | R. Hastened |
| B. Oval office | J. Disappoint | S. Entity |
| C. Lisbon | K. Malted milk | T. Wizard of Oz |
| D. Linchpin | L. Yellowknife | U. Reading |
| E. Impasses | M. Estates | V. Inch by inch |
| F. Navigated | N. Reatas | W. Thoughtful |
| G. Silhouette | O. Supper club | X. Easiness |
| H. Amazed | P. Inculcate | Y. Refinish |
| | Q. Tank top | |

QUOTATION

Author—(Max Allan) COLLINS AND (Lynn F.) MYERS

Work—I, THE WRITER (From *Byline: Mickey Spillane*, published by Crippen & Landru, copyright © 2004 by Mickey Spillane)

"... even before the publication of 'Kiss Me Deadly' ... Spillane had made a decision that still puzzles many of his fans—he stopped writing novels to channel his fiction-writing into the magazine field ... where even a superstar ... could not pick up a substantial paycheck."

DYING WORDS

ACROSTIC BY ARLENE FISHER



For instructions on how to solve the acrostic puzzle, turn to page 123.
The solution to the puzzle will appear in the October issue.

DEFINITIONS

WORDS

A. Ancient peninsular city	156	61	48	117	37	126	211	6
B. Tome part	96	130	13	133	201	101	4	167
C. Lunch option: 2 wds.	45	73	158	153	18	196	97	193
D. In a splenetic manner	208	20	54	144	14	173	165	119 65
E. Sensitive sorts	212	5	199	99	109	176	187	64
F. Rises rapidly	113	2	66	42	122	188	86	
G. Will figure	118	206	139	23	41	107	148	81 169
H. Local of some Appalachians (with "the")	175	112	51	103	72	191	85	210 192
I. Supplicated	84	49	131	21	136	78	151	215 161
J. Hit it off: 2 wds.	46	35	127	55	157	116	202	183
K. More slight	172	28	16	149	164	92	124	
L. Magazine founded by Andy Warhol	146	213	36	181	135	108	209	162 90
M. Large-bore instrument	94	15	120	56	47	147	160	180 19
N. One who uses coupons	184	31	80	125	3	60	100	74
O. Site in Matthew 2:1	134	38	106	67	29	166	58	178 182
P. Sheer cotton fabric	121	179	185	40	33	89	204	
Q. Secondary structure	140	115	207	9	76	186	44	88

		1	W	2	F	3	N		4	B	5	E	6	A	7	Y		8	T	9	Q									
		10	U			11	S	12	R	13	B	14	D	15	M	16	K		17	U	18	C		19	M					
20	D	21	I	22	X	23	G	24	T			25	X	26	V			27	U	28	K	29	O	30	Z	31	N			
32	R	33	P	34	X	35	J			36	L	37	A	38	O			39	R	40	P	41	G	42	F	43	Z	44	Q	
45	C			46	J	47	M	48	A	49	I	50	X	51	H	52	U			53	W	54	D		55	J	56	M		
57	W			58	O	59	V	60	N	61	A	62	Y			63	S	64	E	65	D	66	F	67	O	68	Z			
69	S	70	W	71	T	72	H	73	C	74	N			75	Z	76	Q	77	U	78	I	79	W		80	N	81	G		
82	S	83	V	84	I			85	H	86	F	87	R	88	Q	89	P			90	L	91	T	92	K	93	Z	94	M	
		95	T	96	B	97	C			98	R	99	E	100	N			101	B	102	T	103	H	104	Z	105	V	106	O	
107	G	108	L	109	E			110	Z	111	S	112	H	113	F	114	V			115	Q	116	J	117	A	118	G	119	D	
		120	M	121	P	122	F			123	V	124	K	125	N	126	A	127	J	128	U	129	Y	130	B		131	I		
132	S	133	B			134	O	135	L	136	I	137	X	138	R	139	G			140	Q	141	Z			142	Y	143	X	
144	D	145	T			146	L	147	M	148	G	149	K			150	W	151	I			152	Y	153	C	154	R	155	S	
		156	A	157	J	158	C	159	T	160	M	161	I	162	L	163	X			164	K	165	D	166	O		167	B		
168	U	169	G	170	W	171	V	172	K	173	D			174	U	175	H			176	E	177	V	178	O			179	P	
180	M	181	L			182	O	183	J	184	N	185	P	186	O	187	E			188	F	189	T			190	V	191	H	
		192	H	193	C	194	Y			195	Z	196	C	197	X	198	S	199	E			200	Z	201	B	202	J	203	U	
204	P			205	X	206	G			207	Q	208	D	209	L	210	H			211	A	212	E	213	L	214	T	215	I	

R. Furrowed

87 154 32 98 138 12 39

S. "I see" might indicate it

198 155 11 63 69 111 132 82

T. Potamogale: 2 wds.

189 8 71 102 24 159 91 214 145 95

U. Promoted

77 17 168 203 174 52 128 10 27

V. Recess, maybe

105 59 123 190 114 177 26 83 171

W. Seduced: 2 wds. (slang)

70 53 1 57 170 150 79

X. Chafed

143 197 163 205 34 137 25 50 22

Y. Genetics discoverer

152 129 62 7 194 142

Z. Be mettlesome

200 141 195 104 93 30 43 110 75 68

THE HEART HAS REASONS

O'NEIL DE NOUX

For two days she came and sat under the WPA shelter in Cabrini Playground with her baby, sometimes rocking the infant, sometimes walking between the oaks and magnolias, back and forth. Sometimes she would sing. She came around nine A.M., and around lunchtime she'd reach into the paper bag she'd brought and nibble on a sandwich. After, she would cover her shoulder with a small pink blanket and nurse her baby beneath it. Around five P.M. she would walk away, up Dauphine Street.

On the third morning, the newspaper said to expect showers brought in by an atypical autumn cold front from Canada, which would finally break the heat wave that had lingered through the sizzling summer of 1948. When the rain swept in, it was one of those all-day New Orleans rainstorms that started suddenly and built into monsoon proportions. I grabbed two umbrellas and found her huddled under the shelter.

"Come on," I told her, "come get out of the rain." I held out an umbrella. When she didn't take it immediately, I stood it against the wall and stepped away to give her some room. She looked younger up close, nineteen or eighteen, and stood about five two, a thin girl with short, dark brown hair and darker brown eyes, all saucer wide and blinking at me with genuine fear.

I took another step away from her, not wanting to tower over her with my six-foot frame, and smiled as warmly as I could. "Please. Come take your baby out of the rain." I opened the second umbrella and handed it to her.

Slowly, a shaky white hand extended for the umbrella, those big eyes still staring at me. I took a step toward the edge of the shelter. A loud thunderclap startled us both to jump and started the baby crying.

I led the way back across the small playground, the umbrellas pretty useless in the deluge, and hurried through the brick and wrought-iron fence to Barracks Street, having to pause a moment

Tim Foley



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to let a yellow cab pass. She moved carefully behind me.

At my building, I held the door open for her. I closed the umbrellas and started up the stairs for my apartment. "I'll bring towels down," I called back to her, taking the stairs two at a time.

Moving quickly, I grabbed two large towels from my bathroom, lighting the gas heater while I was in there, and pulled the big terry cloth robe I never wore from the closet, draping it over the bathroom door before leaving my apartment door open on the way out. She was standing next to the smoky glass door of my office, rocking her baby, who had stopped crying. She gave me another frightened look when I came down and extended the towels to her.

"Top of the stairs, take a left. My apartment door's open." I reached into my suit coat pocket and pulled out a business card. "That's my office behind you. The number's on the card. Go upstairs. The heater's on in the bathroom. Lock yourself in and take your time. Call me if you need anything."

I shoved the towels at her and she took them with her free hand. I pressed the business card between her fingers as she moved away from my office door. She took a hesitant step for the stairs, then stopped and watched me with hooded eyes.

Stepping to my office door, I said, "I'm Lucien Caye," nodding at my name stenciled on the door. "I'm a detective."

Her lower lip quivered, so I tried my warmest smile again. "Go on upstairs. You'll be safe up there. Lock yourself in."

The baby began to whine. She took in a deep breath and backed toward the bottom step. Glancing up the stairs, she said, "First door on the left?"

"It's open," I said as I stepped into my office. "I'll start up some eggs and bacon. I have a stove in here." I left the door open and returned to the row of windows overlooking Barracks Street where I'd been watching her. A louder thunderclap shook the old building before two flashes of lightning danced over the rooftops of the French Quarter. The street was a mini canal already, the storm washing the dust from my old gray 1940 DeSoto coach parked against the curb.

"Bacon and eggs," I said aloud and turned back to the small kitchen area at the rear of my office. I had six eggs left in the small refrigerator, a half slab of bacon, and milk for the coffee. I sniffed the milk and it smelled okay.

I telephoned my apartment before going up. She answered after the sixth ring with a hesitant "Yes?"

"It's Lucien. Downstairs. I'm bringing up some bacon, eggs, and coffee, okay?"

I heard her breathing.

"I'm the guy who got you outta the rain. Remember? Dark hair. Six feet tall. I brought an umbrella."

"The door's not locked," she said.

"Okay. I'll be right up." When she didn't hang up immediately, I told her, "You can hang up now."

"All right." I brought up a heaping plate of breakfast and a mug of café au lait. I'd left my coat downstairs, along with my .38 revolver. Didn't want to spook her any more than she was already.

She was sitting on the sofa, her baby sleeping next to her. In the terry cloth robe, a towel wrapped around her wet hair like a turban, she looked like a kid, not a mother. The baby lay on its belly, wrapped in a towel. I went to my kitchen table and put the food down, flipping on the light and telling her I'd be downstairs if she needed anything else.

"Is that a holster?" she asked, staring at my right hip.

"I told you I'm a detective." I kept moving toward the door, giving her a wide berth, hoping the fear in her eyes would subside.

"Thank you," she said, standing up, arms folded across her chest now.

I pointed down the hall beyond my bathroom. "There's a washer back there for your clothes and a clothesline out back, if it ever stops raining."

She nodded and said, "I'm Kaye Bishop." She looked down at her baby. "This is Donna."

I stopped just inside the door. "Nice to meet you, Kaye. If you need to call anyone, you know where the phone is."

I hesitated in case she wanted to keep talking, and she surprised me with, "You're not how I would picture a detective."

"How's that?"

Her eyes, like chocolate agates, stared back at me. "You seem polite. Maybe too polite."

"You've been out there for three days. You all right?"

"We'll be fine when Charley comes for us."

"Charley?"

"Charley Rudabaugh. Donna's father. We're not married yet. That's why I'm staying with the Ursulines."

Nuns. The Ursuline convent on Chartres Street. Oldest building in the Quarter. Only building that didn't burn in the two fires that engulfed the city in the eighteenth century, or so the story goes. For an instant, I saw Kaye Bishop in a colonial costume, as a casket girl, labeled because they'd arrived in New Orleans with all their belongings in a single case that looked like a casket. Imported wives from France, daughters of impoverished families sent to the New World to marry the French settlers. The Ursulines took them

under wing to make sure they were properly married before taken off by the rough settlers. Looks like they're still taking care of young girls.

"The church took us in." Her eyes were wet now. "We're waiting until Charley can get us a place."

Donna let out a little cry and Kaye scooped her up. Then she moved to my mother's old rocking chair next to the French doors, which opened to the wrought-iron balcony that wrapped around my building along the second floor. As she rocked her baby, she reached up and unwrapped the towel on her head, shook out her hair, and rubbed the towel through her hair.

The baby giggled and she giggled back. "You like that?" She shook her hair out again and the baby laughed. Turning to me, she said, "Can you get my purse? It's in the bathroom."

I brought it to her and she took out a brush and brushed out her short brown hair. Donna peeked up at me, hands swinging in small circles, legs kicking.

"She's a beautiful baby," I said, backing away, not wanting to crowd them.

Kaye smiled at her daughter as she brushed her hair, the rocker moving now. I was about to ask if the eggs and bacon were okay when she started singing in a low voice a song in French, a song that sat me down on the sofa.

My mother sang that song to me. I recognized the refrain . . . "*le coeur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*" Still don't know what it means. I wanted to ask Kaye, but I didn't want to interrupt her as she hummed part of the song and sang part.

I closed my eyes and listened. It was hard because I could hear my heart beating in my ears. When the singing stopped and I opened my eyes, Kaye was staring at me; I could see she wasn't afraid of me anymore.

Two hours later, just as I was about to call upstairs to suggest I go over and pick up Charley, she called and said, "Could you get a message to Charley for me?"

"Sure."

"He's working at the Gulf station, Canal and Claiborne. He's a mechanic," she said with pride.

Slipping my blue suit coat back on, I looked out at the rain still falling on my DeSoto. It wasn't coming down as hard now. I slid my .38 back into its holster and took the umbrella anyway. I started to grab my tan fedora but left it on the coat rack. Hats just mess up my hair.

It took a good half hour to reach the station on a drive that nor-

mally took fifteen minutes. Everyone in front of me drove slowly, as if they had never seen rain before in one of the wettest cities in the country. I resisted leaning on my horn for an old man wearing a hat two sizes too large for his pinhead, wondering why he couldn't get his Cadillac out of first gear.

Forked lightning danced in the sky, right over the tan bricks of Charity Hospital towering a few blocks behind the Gulf station as I pulled in. The station stood out brightly in the rain, illuminated by lights that were normally on only at night. I parked outside the middle bay of the garage with the word "tires" above the doorway. The other bays, marked "lubrication" and "batteries," were filled with jacked-up vehicles.

Leaving the umbrella in my DeSoto, I jogged into the open bay and came face up with a hulking man holding a tire iron.

"Hi, I'm looking for Charley Rudabaugh."

He lifted the tire iron and took a menacing step toward me. I stumbled back, turning to my right as I reached under my coat for my revolver.

"Sam!" a voice boomed behind the man, and he stopped, but kept leering at me with angry eyes.

I kept the .38 against my leg as I took another step back to the edge of the open bay doors so he'd have to take two steps to get to me. I'd have to run or shoot him. Neither choice was a good one. A second man, even bigger, came around the man with the tire iron. Both wore dark green coveralls with the orange Gulf Oil logos over their hearts.

The bigger man growled, "Who the hell are you?"

"Kaye Bishop sent me with a message for Charley."

"Kaye? Where is she?" He took a step toward me, and I showed him my Smith and Wesson but didn't point it at him.

"I'm a private detective. You wanna tell me what's goin' on?"

"You got an ID?"

I don't remember ever seeing Bogart, as Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, showing his ID to anyone, but I had to do it—a lot. I reached into my coat pocket with my left hand, opened my credentials pouch for him, and asked, "Where's Charley?"

The bigger man looked hard at my ID. "I'm Malone," he said. "Charley works for me. Where's Kaye?"

"At my office." I slipped my creds back into my coat pocket.

Malone turned his face to the side and spoke to his buddy with the tire iron. "He's too skinny to work for Joe. And his nose ain't been broke. Yet."

The man with the tire iron backed away, leaning against the fender of a Ford with its rear jacked up.

"I told you where Kaye is. Where's Charley?" I reholstered my revolver but kept my distance.

"Don't trust the bastard," said the man with the tire iron.

I could see, in both sets of eyes, that there was no way they were telling me anything. Maybe they'd tell Kaye. I suggested we get her on the phone. I stayed in the garage as Malone called my apartment from the office area. When he signaled for me to come in and get the phone, the first hulk finally put the tire iron down.

"Kaye?"

"Charley's in the hospital," she said excitedly. "Can you bring me to him?"

"I'll be right there." I hung up and looked at Malone. "You wanna tell me what happened now?"

Charley Rudabaugh was a good kid, a hard worker, Malone explained, but he borrowed money from the wrong man. Malone learned that tidbit that very morning when a goon came by with a sawed-off baseball bat and broke Charley's right arm.

"I was under a Buick and couldn't get out before the goon got away."

"Was he this Joe you thought I was working for?"

"No. The goon works for Joe Grosetto."

Malone explained Grosetto was a local loan shark. I asked where I could locate this shark but neither knew for sure. Charley would.

Kaye and Donna were waiting for me in the foyer of my building. I brought them out to the DeSoto under the umbrella and drove straight to Charity Hospital, parking at an empty meter outside the emergency room.

Charley Rudabaugh was about five ten, thin, with curly light brown hair and green eyes. He smiled at Kaye and kissed Donna before finally noticing me standing behind them. His right arm in a fresh cast, Charley blinked and said, "Who are you?"

I let Kaye explain as she held his left hand, bouncing a gurgling Donna cradled in her free arm. He looked at me suspiciously, sizing me up, giving me that look a man gives another when he has just showed up with his woman. When Kaye finished, more nervous now, she asked Charley what had happened to him.

He turned to her and his eyes softened. He took in a deep breath and said, "Haney." She became pale, and I pulled a chair over for her to sit, then went back to the doorway.

"He didn't ask where I was?" asked Kaye.

Charley shook his head. "He just wanted the money."

Kaye's eyes teared up, and she pressed her face against his left arm and cried. Charley's eyes filled too and he closed them, but

the tears leaked out, down his lean face. Donna's arms swung around in circles as she lay cradled. I waited until one of the adults looked at me.

It was Charley. I asked, "How much money are we talking about?"

"This doesn't concern you."

Kaye stopped crying now and wiped her face on the sheet before sitting up.

I tried a different tack. "What school didya' go to?" The old New Orleans handshake. This was no public school kid. He told me he went to Jesuit. I told him I went to Holy Cross. Two Catholic school boys who'd gone to rival schools.

"Your parents can't help?" Jesuit was expensive.

"They don't live here anymore. And don't even ask about Kaye's parents. This is our problem."

"Everyone needs help sometimes."

"That's what you do? Some kinda guardian angel?"

I shook my head, thought about it a second, and said, "Actually, it's what I do most of the time. Help people figure things out."

"We can't afford a private eye."

I tried still another tack. "How do I find this Grosetto? This Haney?"

Charley shook his head. Kaye wouldn't meet my eyes, so I left them alone, went out into the waiting area. Ten minutes later a blond-headed doctor went in, then a nurse. I caught the doctor on the way out. It was a simple fracture of both bones, the radius and ulna between wrist and elbow.

"It was a blunt instrument, officer," the doctor said. "Says he fell, but something struck that arm."

I thanked the doc without correcting him that I wasn't a cop. The nurse was finishing up, telling them how Charley had to move on soon as the cast was hard. Kaye turned her red eyes to me, and I took in a deep breath. "I'll take you to the Ursulines, okay?"

Her shoulders sank. I turned to Charley. "So where have you been staying?"

"He's been sleeping at the Gulf station," Kaye said.

He shot her a worried look.

"They don't know," Kaye added. "He stays late to lock up and sleeps inside, opens in the morning."

I put my proposition to them to use my apartment and stepped out for them to discuss it, gave them another ten minutes before walking back in. Kaye shot me a nervous smile, holding Donna up now, the baby smiling too as her mother jiggled her.

I looked at Charley, who asked, "I just wanna know why you're doing this."

"How old are you, Charley?"

"Twenty. And Kaye's eighteen. We're both adults now."

I nodded slowly and said, "I watched a young mother and her baby spend three days in that playground, avoiding the kids when they came, keeping to themselves until the rain blew in. I've got two apartments, one converted into an office downstairs with a sofa bed, kitchen, and bath. I've slept down there before. You got a better offer?"

Charley and Kaye wouldn't volunteer any information about Grosetto and Haney, and there was no way Malone and his tire-iron friend were going to be much help. But I knew who would. He was sitting behind a worn government-issue gray metal desk, in a government-issue gray desk chair, in a small office with gray walls lined with mug shots, wanted posters, and an electric clock that surprisingly had the correct time.

Detective Eddie Sullivan had lost more of his red hair, making up for it with an old-fashioned handlebar mustache. Grinning at me as I stepped up to his desk, he said, "I was about to get a bite."

"Me too."

So I bought him lunch around the corner from the First Precinct house on South Saratoga Street at Jilly's Grill. Hamburgers, french fries, coffee, and a wedge of apple pie for my large friend. Sullivan was my height exactly, but he outweighed me by a hundred pounds, mostly flab.

Eddie Sullivan was the Bunco Squad for the First Precinct, since his partner retired without a replacement in sight. He handled con artists, forgers, loan sharks, and the pawn shop detail, checking lists of pawned items against the master list of stolen articles reported to police. I waited until he'd wolfed down his burger and fries and was starting in on his slab of pie before bringing up Grosetto and Haney. He nodded and told me he knew both.

"Grosetto's a typical Guinea—short, olive-skinned, pencil-thin mustache, weighs about a hundred pounds soaking wet. Haney is black Irish—big, goofy-looking. Typical bully." He stuffed another chunk of pie into his mouth.

"Grosetto? He mobbed up?"

Sullivan shook his head. "He wishes, but he ain't Sicilian. I think he's Napolitano or just some ordinary wop. You got someone willin' to file charges against these bums?"

"Maybe. I need to know where they hang out."

"Easy. Rooms above the Blue Gym. Canal and Galvez."

I knew the place and hurried to finish my meal as Sullivan ordered a second wedge of pie. He managed to say, between mouthfuls, "I'd go with you but I gotta be in court at one o'clock. Drop me by the courthouse?"

As he climbed out of my DeSoto in front of the hulking, gray Criminal Courts Building at Tulane and Broad Avenues, he thanked me for lunch, adding, "See if you can talk your friend into pressing charges. I could use a good collar."

"I'll try."

The Blue Gym was hard to miss, sitting on the downtown side of Canal and Galvez Streets. Painted bright blue, it stood three stories high, the bottom two stories an open gym with six boxing rings inside, smelling of sweat, blood, and cigar smoke. I weaved my way through a haze of smoke to the back stairs and went up to a narrow hall that smelled like cooked fish. A thin man in boxing shorts came rushing out of a door and almost bumped into me.

"Oh, 'scuse me," he said.

"I'm looking for Grosetto."

He pointed to the door he'd just exited and rushed off. I reached back and unsnapped the trigger guard on the holster of my Smith and Wesson, then stepped through the open door to spot a man behind a beat-up wooden desk. He glared at me with hard brown eyes, trying to look tough—hard to do when he stood up and topped off at maybe five three and was skinny as a stick man. He wore a sharkskin lime green suit.

"Who the hell are you?" he snarled from the right side of his tiny mouth.

I stepped up, keeping an eye on his hands in case he tried something stupid, and said, "How much does Charley Rudabaugh owe you?"

"Huh?"

"How much?" I kept my voice even, without a hint of emotion.

The beady eyes examined me up and down, then he sat and said, "You ain't Italian. What are you? Some kinda Mexican?"

I wasn't about to tell this jerk I'm half French, half Spanish, so I told him, "I'm the man with the money. You want your money, tell me how much Charley owes you."

"Three hundred and fifty. Tomorrow it's gonna be four hundred."

"I'll be right back." And I didn't look back as I strolled out, making it to the nearest branch of the Whitney Bank before it closed. My bank accounts, I have a savings account now, were both in good shape after the Duponçeau case. As I stood in the teller line,

I remembered the salient facts that brought such money into my possession—

It was a probate matter. When it got slow, I'd go over to civil court, pick up an inheritance case. This one was a search for descendants of a recently deceased uptown matron. Flat fee for my work. If I found any, they got the inheritance; if not, the state got it. I'd worked a dozen before and never found anyone until I found Peter Duponçeau, a fellow vet, in a VA Hospital in Providence, Rhode Island.

Not long after I had caught a bullet from a Nazi sniper at Monte Cassino, he collected a chest full of shrapnel from a Japanese bombardment on a small island called Saipan. Peter was the grandson of the recently deceased uptown matron. His mother was also deceased. When I met him to confirm his inheritance, he was back in the hospital for yet another operation. At least the last months of his life were lived in luxury in a mansion overlooking Audubon Park. He left most of his estate to several local VFW chapters and ten percent to Lucien Caye, Esquire. When the certified check arrived, I contemplated getting an armored car to drive me to the bank. I couldn't make that much money in five years, unless I robbed a bank or two.

Grosetto was back behind his desk, but there was an addition to the room, a large man standing six four, outweighing me by a good hundred pounds of what looked like gristle, with thick, unruly black hair and a ruddy complexion. He wore a rumpled brown suit, and he stared at me with dull brown eyes, Mississippi River water brown. My Irish friend Sullivan described Haney as black Irish, that is, probably descended from the Spanish of the Great Armada, the ones who weren't drowned by the English. The ones who took the prevailing winds, beaching their ships along the Irish coast to be taken in by fellow Catholics to later breed with the locals. I would have given Haney only a cursory look, except I didn't expect he'd be so young, early twenties maybe.

Stepping up to the desk, I dropped the bank envelope in front of Grosetto. "Rudabaugh sign anything? Promissory note? IOU?" I knew better but asked anyway.

Grosetto picked up the envelope and counted the money, nodding when he was finished. I turned to Haney. "You still have that baseball bat?"

He looked at Grosetto for an answer and then looked back. I could see he wasn't all there.

"Try that stunt again and I'll put two in your head. And I'll get away with it," I said.

"Alls I want is the girl," Haney said.

"What?"

He looked down at his feet, all shy-like, and said, "I seen her," looking up now with those dull eyes, "*Real* pretty." He followed with a childlike chuckle.

I turned back to Grosetto, "Better let him in on the real world."

Grosetto was smiling now, or trying to with that crooked mouth. "He usually gets what he wants."

"Not this time," I said.

No use arguing with idiots. When I got back to my office, I located my blackjack, a chunk of lead attached to a thick spring, covered with black leather, brand-named the Bighorn because, allegedly, it could coldcock a charging bighorn ram. I only used it twice back when I was a patrolman, and it worked well enough to incapacitate bigger, combative men. Then I put away my .38 and brought out my army issue Colt .45 caliber automatic and loaded it, switching holsters now. I needed something with stopping power.

I called upstairs and Kaye answered, telling me the baby and Charley were asleep.

"I need to get a couple things, okay?"

She let me in, and I quickly packed a suitcase with essentials and grabbed a couple suits and fresh shirts. Before stepping out, I waved her over and we whispered in the hall. I told her they owed Grosetto nothing. How? she wanted to know. I told her someone had given me a lot of money, and now I was giving them some.

"Charley won't stand for it. We'll pay you back."

I shrugged, then watched her eyes as I told her I'd met Haney. She blanched, so I followed it with, "Back at Charity, why did you ask Charley if Haney asked where you were?"

She took a step back, crossed her arms, and said, "He's my half brother."

Sitting at my desk in my dark office, I watched the rain finally taper off.

"What about your parents?" I'd asked Kaye up in the hall. She told me her father was dead and her mother had abandoned her when she was five and wouldn't say anything else about the matter, not even who had raised her.

I was thinking that at least they were safe for now, just as I spotted Haney standing next to the playground fence across the street. Didn't take him long to find us. He stood there for a good ten minutes before coming across the street.

I expected the baseball bat, not the revolver stuck in the waistband of his suit pants as he stepped in the foyer of my building.

I'd moved into the shadows next to the stairs, blackjack in my left hand. Slowly, I eased my right hand back to my .45 as he saw me and said softly, "Where is she?"

The sound of squealing tires behind him made him look over his shoulder. When he looked back I had my .45 pointed at his face and said, "That'll be the cavalry."

Two uniforms alighted from the black prowler car and came into the building with their guns out. It was Williams and Jeanfreau, both rookies when I was at the Third Precinct.

I lowered my weapon. "He's got a gun in his waistband."

Williams snatched Haney's revolver, and Jeanfreau cuffed him and dragged him out.

"Aggravated assault, right?" Williams checked with me for the charge.

"Yeah. Hopefully he's a convicted felon." A felon with a firearm would hold Haney for quite a while.

"Thanks," I called out to my old compadres. Williams called back, "Your call broke up the sergeant's poker game. But only for a while."

Charley sat shirtless at my kitchen table holding Donna with his good arm, Kaye in my terry cloth robe again, getting us coffee, them looking like a family now, and I had to tell them about Haney.

Kaye blanched at the news; Charley just nodded while Donna gurgled.

"How close are you?" I asked.

"I'm not even sure he is my half brother," Kaye answered. "He claims to be. Claims my dad was his father. I never met him until he showed up at the hospital when Donna was born."

She didn't volunteer any more, and I didn't want to cross-examine her, sitting at my table, all three adults sipping coffee, which wasn't bad, and I'm picky about my coffee.

I turned to Charley and said, "We need to press charges against Grosetto. I'll back you, and we'll put the slimeball away. My buddy Detective Sullivan is chomping at the bit to nail him."

Charley shook his head and told me, in careful, low tones, how he wanted Grosetto and Haney and all of it behind him, how he was going to pay me back whatever it cost me. I tried for the next half hour, but there was no changing his mind. He said he didn't want to be looking over his shoulder for the rest of his life. God, he was so young.

The coffee kept me up a little while, but the rain came back that night, slapping against my office windows as I lay on my sofa bed.

Why was I lying there? Why wasn't I out on the town, dancing with a long tall blonde in a slinky dress? Maybe bringing her here or going to her place and helping her slip into something more comfortable, like my arms.

I knew the answer; it was upstairs with those kids. So I lay waiting for trouble to return, knowing it would.

Arriving at the Criminal Courts Building early, I searched the docket for Haney's name, wanting to get a word in with the judge before his arraignment. When I couldn't find his name, the acid in my stomach churned. I snatched up a pay phone in the lobby and called Parish Prison, speaking to the shift lieutenant who took his time but looked up the name for me.

"Haney. Yeah. Bonded out four thirty A.M."

I asked more questions and got the obvious answers—a friendly judge and an even friendlier bail bondsman had Haney out before sunrise. The only surprise was that Haney had only two previous arrests, both misdemeanors, no convictions.

I should have gotten a speeding ticket on the way home, but no one was paying attention. Catching my breath when I reached the top of the stairs, I tapped lightly on the door. Even a bachelor knows better than to ring a doorbell with a baby inside. Kaye answered and I let out a relieved sigh, which disappeared immediately when she told me Charley wasn't there.

"Where'd he go?"

"To work. Malone picked him up." Her eyebrows furrowed when she saw the worried look in my eyes. I pointed to the phone, and she opened the door wider, telling me, "Malone said a one-armed Charley was better than any of his other mechanics." She knew the number by heart and I dialed. Malone answered after the fifth ring, and I warned him about Haney being out of jail.

"Didn't know he was in jail."

"Well, he had a gun last night, so be on the lookout."

Then I called Sullivan to make sure the patrol boys did a drive-by at the Gulf Station before I went to see Grosetto.

He was behind the desk wearing the same lime green suit, sporting that same crooked, slimy grin when I walked in on him. The place still reeked of fish.

"Where's Haney?"

Grosetto tried growling, which only made him look like a randy terrier instead of a gangster. His hands dropped below the desk-top, and I turned my left shoulder to him, pulling out my .45, letting him get a look at it.

"Put your hands back on your desk, and they better be empty."

"Who da' heller you comin' in here, tellin' me what to do?"

"Where's Haney?"

He tried smiling, but it looked more like a grimace. "I'm glad you come by. You needa tell Charley he owes another fifty. I, how you put it, miscalculated the amount." This time it was a sickly smile, showing off yellowed teeth.

I shot his telephone, watched it bounce high, slam against the back wall, the loud report of my .45 echoing in my ears. Pointing it at his face now, I said. "Put your hands back on your desk."

He did, his eyes bulging now. I backed up and locked the door behind me and came back to the desk as I holstered my weapon, slammed both hands against the desk, shoving it across the linoleum floor with him and his chair behind, pinning him against the wall.

"Tell Haney I'm looking for him."

Three boxers and two trainers were in the narrow hall. They backed away cautiously when I opened my coat and showed them the .45, none of them saying anything until I started through the gym. A couple of brave ones cursed me behind my back but kept their distance.

I figured Haney was loony enough to come by, but it was Grosetto, just before midnight. He wore a gray dress shirt and black pants, and held his hands high as he stepped into the foyer. I was sitting in darkness, halfway up the stairs, in my shirt and pants, with my .45 in my right hand.

"That you?" he called out when I told him to freeze. I'd unscrewed the hall light.

"What do you want?"

"I come to tell you somethin'."

I went and patted him down, closed and locked the building door, then shoved him into my office, leaving the door open. He smelled like cigarette smoke and stale beer. I made him stand still as I moved to my desk and leaned against it.

"All right, what is it?"

"I made a mistake. Charley don't owe me nothin'."

"Good."

He tried smiling again, but it still didn't work. "I checked on you. You got some rep. You know. War hero. Ex-cop. Bad when you gotta be bad." He looked around my office for a second. "You check up on me?"

"In the dictionary. Under *scumbag*."

"You funny. You owe me a phone, you know."

Maybe it was the twitch in his eye or the way he sucked in a

breath when I heard it, a thump upstairs. Grosetto should never play poker. It was in his eyes, and I was on him in three long strides, slamming the .45 against his pointed head, tumbling him out of my way.

I took the stairs three at a time, reaching the top as a gunshot rang out. My apartment door was open and a woman's screaming voice echoed as I ran in, scene registering as I swung my .45 to the right toward the figure standing with a gun in hand. The gun turned toward me, and I fired twice. Haney bounced on his toes as the rounds punched his chest. The gun dropped, and he fell straight back, head ricocheting off an end table.

Kaye, with Donna in her arms, moved for Charley as he lay on the kitchen floor, a circle of bright red blood under him. Holstering my weapon, I leaped toward them as Kaye cradled his head in her lap.

He was conscious, a neat hole in his lower abdomen, blood oozing through his white undershirt. I jumped back to the phone and called for an ambulance. When I turned back, Charley was trying to sit up.

"Don't!" I jumped into the kitchen, snatched an ice tray from the freezer, broke up the ice, wrapped it in a dishcloth, and got Kaye out of the way. Donna was screeching now. I pressed the ice against the wound and told Charley to keep calm, the ambulance would be right there. Then I remembered I'd locked the foyer door and had to go down for it.

Williams and Jeanfreau accompanied the ambulance, and they used my phone to call the detectives, while Charley was rolled out with Kaye and Donna in tow. He was still conscious.

"What'd you shoot him with?" Williams asked, pointing to the two large holes around Haney's heart. I pointed to my .45, which I'd put on the kitchen counter before they came in.

It was then I remembered Grosetto and took Williams down to my office. The little man was just coming around. Williams slapped his cuffs on him and brought him up to have a look at Haney. He looked even younger in death. He was wearing a yellow shirt and dungarees, his eyes duller now, his face flaccid. His shoes were tied in double knots as if his mom had made sure they wouldn't come undone.

It took the detectives forty minutes to arrive. I made coffee for all and was on my second cup when Lieutenant Frenchy Capdeville strolled in, trailing cigarette smoke, with a rookie dick at his heels. Frenchy needed a haircut badly, his black hair hung in loose curls over the collar of his brown suit.

His rookie partner had tried a pencil-thin mustache like

Frenchy's, but his was lopsided. "Joe Sparks," Frenchy introduced him to me. Sparks, also in a brown suit, was sharp enough to keep quiet and let Frenchy run the show, which he did, quickly and efficiently.

After the coroner's men took Haney away, they took me and Grosetto to the Detective Bureau, Frenchy calling in Eddie Sullivan. While they booked Grosetto, I gave a formal statement about the first man I'd shot since the war. Self-defense, defined in Louisiana's Napoleonic Code Law, was justifiable homicide.

It didn't take a detective to discover how Haney had come in the back way—through the broken fence of the building next door, across the back courtyard, and up the rear fire escape to break the hallway window.

"How'd he get in the apartment?" I asked Kaye as we sat in the hall at Charity Hospital the following morning, while Charley slept in the recovery ward. Dark circles around her eyes, she looked pale as she rocked Donna slowly. Thankfully, the baby was asleep.

"I heard scratching against the door and thought it was the cat, the black one that's always around."

"Did he say anything?"

"No. He just shoved past me and shot Charley. Then he stood there looking at me."

A nurse came out of Charley's room and said, "He's awake now." I didn't go in. I went back home to look up my landlord.

Charley Rudabaugh spent six days in the hospital. When I brought him home and walked him past my apartment door to the rear apartment, he balked until Kaye opened the door and smiled at him.

"What's going on?"

Kaye pulled him in and I stood in the doorway, amazed at what she'd done with the place in a few days. It came furnished, but she'd brightened up the place, replacing the dark curtains with yellow ones. Donna, lying on her back in a playpen in the center of the living room, was trying to play with a rubber duck, slapping at it and gurgling.

It took Charley a good minute to take in the scene as Kaye eased up and hugged him.

"Here's the deal," I told them over coffee at their kitchen table. "The landlord gave us a break on the place. I'm fronting y'all the money. You don't have to pay me back, but if you insist, you can, but get on your feet first." I'd just put any money they gave me in a bank account for Donna's education.

Then I explained about how it really wasn't my money. It had been a gift, and I was sharing it. "Everyone needs help sometimes. And you two have had a bad time recently."

I could see Charley was still confused but not Kaye, beaming at him, paying little if any attention to me. I thanked her for the coffee and stood up to leave. Charley's eyes narrowed as he asked, "I understand what you say, but it's just hard to figure you ain't got some kinda motive. Everybody does."

I started for the door, turned, and said, "Sometimes things are exactly as they appear to be."

Kaye moved to her daughter and began humming that same song, repeating the line in French again, "*le coeur a . . .*"

"What is that?" I had to ask.

"It's the reason you're doing all this." She smiled at me, looking like a schoolkid in her white shirt and jeans. "An old French saying that goes, 'The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing'." She smiled down at her baby.

It wasn't until later, as I sat in my mother's rocker looking out the open French doors of my apartment, out at the dark roofs of the Quarter with the moon beaming overhead, that I heard my mother's voice back when she was young, a voice I haven't heard for so long, as she sang, "*le coeur a . . .*"

Then it hit me.

The heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing. Kaye hadn't meant just me. It cut both ways. She'd also meant Haney, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck standing up. ♡

HOW TO SOLVE AN ACROSTIC

Using the definitions, fill in as many words as you can in the column on the right. Then transfer the letters from the column to their corresponding places in the diagram. A black square in the diagram indicates the end of a word. When completed, the diagram will yield a mystery-themed quotation. The initial letters of the words in the righthand column spell out the name of the author and the work from which the quote was taken.

POOR DUMB MOUTHS

"I tell you that which you yourselves do know,
Show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor, poor dumb mouths;
And bid them speak for me."

—*Julius Caesar*, III.ii

"**S**ame deal, Adam. Five bucks an hour, ten hours tops. Anything over ten's a freebie." McMorton thumbed the folder with a thumb unnaturally soft and pink, a thumb streaked from pinching the moist end of his unnaturally brown and foul cigar.

Adameus Clay took the folder from him delicately and with some disgust, though it didn't show on his face. Disgust rarely showed on his face. He almost always appeared to be smiling, even in his sleep. It was a physiological quirk that he had often regretted, though he had to admit that in the long run it had probably done him more good than harm. But the run had been long indeed, and just when the end was in sight, five years until early retirement, along came the twins and . . .

"Adam. You hearin' me?"

"Of course, Marvyn."

"Well, don't space out on me, hear? I mean, brother-in-law or no brother-in-law, you space out, you're through. Jiminy. Like I was saying, this one shouldn't be more than a four hour job. An hour with the beneficiary, an hour on the reports, an hour writing it all up. I'm giving you an extra hour for fumbles." McMorton leaned far back in his swivel chair, which Clay thought a dangerous thing to do, given all that bulk, and somehow grinned around the cigar clamped between yellow-tinted teeth. Clay knew what was coming because the same thing came at this time every time. "But this one's so easy," said McMorton, "that even a PhD could do it." Then he laughed, the one sound that by itself could twist Clay's face

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into a reasonable facsimile of disgust. "Well, good to see ya and all, Adam, but I'm a busy man, busy man. I don't get paid to sit on my duff like you high foreheads do."

Clay bit back a torrent of abuse, thinking particularly of Kent's torrent against the wormy Oswald in Act II of *King Lear*. To all appearances, however, he was still smiling vaguely. He forced his next words out with difficulty. "Uh, Marvyn, I need more money?" Somehow it came out as a question.

"Yeah, so do I. Five bucks. Period."

"You pay other claims investigators more."

"*Other* claims investigators? You an investigator? Look, Adam, old bean, old chap, I'm doing you a favor, right? Gift horse, right? I mean, I'm going out on a limb here. Ever hear of nepa, of nepa . . ."

"Nepotism." Clay shuddered at the implications of the word and closed his eyes against the sight of the primary implication and its fat cigar.

"Right. I could lose my job."

Clay could see that McMorton was about to laugh again, so he stood up quickly. "Well, thank you anyway, Marvyn. My best to Ruth. I'd better be . . ."

But it was too late, and it was beyond laughter and into guffawing. "Of course, if you find fraud here,"—McMorton broke up completely for some long seconds—"fraud here, Acme Home and Casualty will pay you fifteen percent of a hundred and eighty G's. That's . . . that's . . ."

"Twenty-seven thousand dollars," murmured Clay wistfully.

"Yeah." Guffaw turned into bellow. "Fat chance."

Which was the term Adameus Clay used to refer to his brother-in-law from that moment on.

Clay felt guilty all the way to the hospital.

He should be grateful, he knew, and he felt guilty that he wasn't more grateful, but it was hard to be grateful to Fat Chance. He had even calmly and rationally drawn up a list of all the reasons that he should be grateful—his brother-in-law was providing extra money, was letting him work at a job for which he had no training, had not let age stand in the way. But for every reason to be grateful, there was an equally compelling reason to punch Fat Chance's potato nose—you call that money, no one needs training for this, age deserves some respect.

"Oh, well," he sighed as he eased into the parking lot, "make virtue of necessity."

But it was hard to make virtue of this. He hated what he was

about to do. After carefully wiping all traces of Fat Chance's smeared thumbprints off the folder with a handkerchief that he promptly threw away, Clay had scanned the summary report for main points. Auto accident six weeks ago at dusk. Bridge abutment. One dead, Susan Cannon, good but not bestselling writer of inspirational novels. One survivor, husband and beneficiary, Henderson Cannon. Multiple injuries—broken bones, dislocations, contusions, lacerations, punctures. A man severely injured and not yet out of the hospital, a man undoubtedly still grieving, a man to whom a hundred and eighty thousand dollars probably meant nothing at this point in his life. And here I am, he thought, about to go through the pointless and cruel exercise of quizzing him about the accident just so the proper forms can be filled out in double triplicate. Clay had trouble just talking to strangers, but this kind of invasion . . .

He realized that he was still sitting in the car, engine running, trying to avoid the inevitable. For thirty seconds more he considered the possibility of driving back to Fat Chance's office and tossing the file on his desk in a gesture of righteous contempt. Then he heard what he feared was a new rattling cough from the engine and immediately cut off the ignition. "Necessity is indeed the mother," he sighed as he got out and locked up carefully, checking the doors twice. The maroon hood of his 1948 Studebaker shone with rich depths. He had owned the car for thirty-five years, had spent embarrassing sums maintaining and restoring her, had named her Brunhilde. He needed money, but even to think of selling her now . . . He wiped at an invisible spot on the paint with a new handkerchief, then headed for St. Ebenezzer's visitors' entrance, pausing once behind his car to make sure he had lined it up precisely between the lines of the parking space.

He finally found Room 5501. "East Wing," the orderly had said with a faint smirk. West Wing it was, last room in West Wing. Clay had walked the entire lengths of the two fifth floor corridors to find that out, and now he was sweating slightly and unpleasantly. He pulled down his coat, straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and knocked softly.

No answer, but the sounds of the television filtered through the door. He knocked again and pushed the door open just enough to put his head into the room. Cannon was sitting up in his bed, still bandaged in places, sections of the *Wall Street Journal* spread around him. He was giggling at the television. On the screen the coyote was riding a rocket into a wall of red sandstone while the roadrunner beep-beeped across the desert highway. Another giggle.

Clay cleared his throat. "Mr. Cannon?" He said it twice more before Cannon heard and turned to him, apparently embarrassed and angry as he killed the sound of the television with his remote control.

"Why don't you try knocking?" he growled.

"I did. I'm sorry." Clay gave himself a mental kick in the pants for the apology. It was like saying "Thank you, officer," to the policeman who wrote you a ticket. He had done that once, too. "I'm sorry to disturb you, that is," he added, trying to make some sense out of it. "I'm Adameus Clay, a claims representative from . . ."

Cannon giggled again. "What kind of name is Adameus?"

Clay shrugged and spread his hands as if in apology, looking for all the world as if he were smiling. "You may call me Adam."

"Claims rep, huh? Well, where the hell have you been? I knew the lawyer threat would work. You guys are trying to stiff me."

"No, Mr. Cannon, let me assure you that we are not. And please accept my apologies for the delay." Now I'm apologizing for Fat Chance, he thought. This just isn't worth it. "May I sit down?"

"Yes, you may sit down, Pops, but not in here. You go sit in accounts receivable and straighten up this bill."

Clay was frozen with his hand on the chair he had been pulling out, his unsmile transfixed as if nailed to his face. "I'm not sure I follow you, Mr. Cannon."

Cannon sank back onto his mountain of pillows. "Another nerd. You'd better follow me. I didn't pay outrageous premiums just to have you dance away when I have an accident. I know my rights, Pops. When I buy health insurance, I expect it to pay off when I need it."

"Mr. Cannon, I'm here about life insurance, not health. Your late wife's policy, sir. My condolences." Clay congratulated himself for maintaining his composure.

Cannon looked blank for a moment. "You're not from Mountain Valley Mutual?"

"No, sir. I'm from Acme."

"Oh. Oh. Well, why didn't you say so, Pops? Those guys at Mountain Valley haven't paid one penny on my bill here, and it's a bill, let me tell you."

Clay was suddenly in a hurry just to get it done and get out. "I hate to intrude on your hour of grief, Mr. Cannon, but I'm afraid I have a few questions to ask you."

"You insurance people are all alike, you know? Here I'm thinking that you might be ready to hand over the check, in person even, but no, you snivel in here with phony condolences and more questions. Is it about the accident?"

Clay still stood by the chair. "Yes, I'm afraid so."

"Forget it, Pops. Get out. I don't want to see that little balding head poke around my door again unless it's preceded by a hand with a check in it. I've been over that accident a dozen times. You've got reports, the police have reports, Mountain Valley has reports, all God's children got reports, and they've all got the same bottom line. I want my money or I really will sue."

Clay didn't care if he did sue. He might enjoy seeing Fat Chance suffer a bit. But he did care about his hair, or what was left of his hair, especially with the twins. When they were twelve, he would be seventy, and he wanted at least to *look* young for them, but his hair had perversely begun thinning faster this year. So when Cannon made a reference to his little balding head, Clay looked almost angry, which meant he was furious. "There are some details, Mr. Cannon, that we need to check out." It was the only thing he could think of to sweep to his revenge.

"That's it, Pops. You're sued. You and Everest and everybody. Take your four eyes and get out of here."

"See you in court, Cannon," Clay said before stalking from the room. He'd heard it in a movie once. It sounded good now. But in the elevator it sounded not so good, and he did pour out Kent's torrent of abuse, but he aimed it at himself, muttering in spite of the quizzical faces behind him. So much for extra money, he thought. Well, at least when Fat Chance fires me, I can tell him off. So there is a good side to every situation.

But when he found that someone's bumper had taken a two inch wide strip of paint off the driver's door before putting a double-fist sized dent in Brunhilde's front fender, he was convinced that the only side this situation had was an underside.

When the call came from Fat Chance two days later, it wasn't at all what Clay was expecting. Fat Chance wanted to know where the report was. No, Cannon hadn't called him, why should he? Well, being sorry wasn't good enough. The report was on his desk by Friday or Adam could pick up pocket change someplace else.

Clay was unaccountably pleased. He had expected to be fired and was in part looking forward to it, but now he found himself eager for the second chance. And secretly he was glad for the excuse to put aside his writing, which he could scarcely admit he was doing, even to himself. He thought his short fiction was good; publishers didn't. So now he was trying to write a hot pink romantic novel under a pseudonym, but he found the obligatory sex scenes embarrassing or amusing, and what he wrote, as he himself recognized the morning after, had all the seductiveness of a com-

mencement address. To electrify the scenes, he was researching heaving bosoms, firm backsides, and the allure of the water- or sweat-drenched body on television commercials, and as long as he wrote exactly what he saw, the passages did seem to have some juice, but any embellishment on his part was viciously satirical. The need for money drove him on, but his pseudonym was Maress Beard, an anagram of "embarrassed." The novel's title was *Love Me Now, My Love*. Any excuse to put it aside was welcomed. Even Fat Chance.

So Clay for the first time approached his assignment with some eagerness. He wanted the paperwork done double quick now, and he would put in for three and a half hours even though the work would cost him six easy, just to stay on Fat Chance's good side. He'd had *sort of* an interview with Cannon; he had accident reports, insurance applications, even the newspaper account of the accident, so he could fill out most of the forms and fudge what he didn't know. He told himself that this was all a formality anyway. Acme would pay off, but only by the numbers.

Clay dropped the manuscript of *Love Me Now, My Love* into the bottom drawer and spread Acme's paperwork across his desk. He'd have to start all over, read thoroughly this time. He began with the ambulance report and was struck again by the conglomeration of Cannon's injuries, wincing at each cold detail. The emergency room write-up was even worse. He put both reports aside. He'd get to them later.

He picked up Acme's own information, beginning with the application for Mrs. Cannon's insurance. It was dull reading, mostly statistical, the have-you-ever-had, is-there-a-history-of variety, but he read line by line, detail by detail, unable to break his scholarly approach to serious reading even for this. When he finished, he found himself chewing on two of the details—the policy was six months old; there were no other life policies on Mrs. Cannon with other companies.

Mountain? he thought, staring off blankly. Mountain? Something about Cannon and a mountain? Mountain Valley, of course, but there was something else. As he thought of Cannon, he found himself running his fingers through his thinning hair and he was suddenly angry. "Everest," he said aloud. Didn't Cannon say something about Everest? And wasn't that an insurance company? Life insurance or health?

He found Everest Insurance ("The Pinnacle of Protection") in the Yellow Pages. Even if Cannon had lied on his insurance application to Acme about not having other life policies, would that give Acme grounds to negate the policy? And if it did, did Cannon

deserve that kind of treatment from him? "Vengeance is petty, Adameus," he said as he finished dialing, but he didn't hang up.

He didn't get far, either. He could almost see the sneer on the secretary's face when she said, "We don't just give out information on clients to any Joe who calls, y'know, bub." She hung up before she heard his apology. Then he was angry again. Rudeness made him angry. There were no decent standards left. What had happened to courtesy, to respect? He called back. The same secretary answered.

"Hello," said Clay, lowering his voice and rounding his vowels, "I'd like to speak to someone about taking out a group health insurance policy. I run a small business, fourteen employees, and we're interested in . . ."

"I'm sorry, sir," she answered in a voice distinctly more polite now, "but we don't carry health. Now if your company needs life or fire or casualty . . ."

No, he told her, and thank you. She told him to have a nice day.

So, he thought. No health. Acme's file showed the health policy at Mountain Valley, the company Cannon had mentioned. Maybe he meant a man named Everest. He called Mountain Valley and asked to speak to Mr. Everest. No one by that name. Just to be sure, he called Acme and Everest, asked both the same question, got the same answer. So perhaps Cannon *had* meant Everest Insurance, and perhaps he *did* have a life policy on his wife there. And maybe with other companies, too. For a moment Clay entertained the thought of murder, a diabolical plot to get rich from his wife's apparently accidental death. He imagined calling every insurance company in the area and finding that Cannon had a huge policy on his wife at each one. "Pops" brings murderer to justice. More important, Adameus Clay makes better than a year's salary in a week. Invest ten thousand dollars each for the twins now and they'd be able to go to college even if he were . . .

"Cut it out, Adameus," he muttered. "Five dollars an hour and you're being Walter Mitty here." But he went back to the police report anyway.

It was gruesome. The car had hit the bridge abutment almost head on, impact on the passenger side. The car was virtually sheared in half. Woman apparently dead on impact, thrown through the windshield into the concrete pillar. Male driver wearing seat belt, multiple injuries. There were no skid marks. Investigating officer says mechanism of accident consistent with driver falling asleep at the wheel and drifting straight into abutment. Theory backed up later by victim interview: Victim claims to remember driving, then to remember waking up in hospital. Feels he fell asleep at the wheel.

There was more, but Clay wanted the reports he had seen earlier, the ambulance and emergency room reports with their lists of injuries. He found them. For the woman, no life support given at the scene. Man had to be extricated from the car with heavy tools and "jaws," whatever they were. The injuries were listed more specifically on the emergency room report, and Adam had to reach back into his own college physiology class to remember what all the words meant—open fracture of the left clavicle; fracture of the right olecranon process, anterior dislocation of right shoulder, fracture of ribs eight through ten left side, lacerated liver and spleen, ruptured bladder, crushed metacarpals on right hand, broken nose, laceration of scalp, face, and neck, crushed right ankle. Clay shuddered and fought nausea, almost feeling the pain in each part of his own body as he read the report. He rubbed his elbow fitfully.

No, he thought, there's no murder here. Death was riding too close for murder.

He finished filling out the report as quickly as he could.

The next day, before his first class, he took the report to Acme. He found himself badly shaken by the descriptions of the accident and injuries. He'd had nightmares all night, filled with screaming brakes, splintering glass, twisting metal, bodies flying to pieces, blood. It took him fifteen minutes more than usual to get to Acme, certain that every other driver was out to get him.

He gave the ungrateful Fat Chance his work, took his seventeen dollars and fifty cents without grace, got back into Brunhilde, and crept to the university, parking at the far side of the lot. He usually ate lunch at home, but today he would have chanced the Ptomaine Tower, as the students called the dining hall, rather than drive again. But the twins needed food, too, so he reluctantly climbed back into Brunhilde, stood his briefcase in the passenger seat, buckled in, and took his chances in the streets. At the Winn Dixie he parked as far away from the other cars as he could, and even though he spent his seventeen fifty and then some, he had only one bag to show for it, full of junior meats and strained prunes and the like, and the bag was heavy, so he was tired and irritated and sweating by the time he balanced it in front of his briefcase and strapped himself in again.

Driving was worse than ever. He felt absolutely paranoid until he finally saw his house two blocks away, and he was just feeling safe when some idiot in a jeep with a bumper made out of steel pipe jerked away from the curb and stalled out right in front of him. By all the laws of physics, he knew he couldn't stop in time,

but his reactions were fast and instinctive—he slammed on the brakes, cut the wheel to the left, flung his right arm to the grocery bag, and hit the jeep.

He realized that someone was asking him if he were okay. He looked around. The jeep was mashed into his front end, steam hissed from his radiator, jars of baby food were on the dash, the floor, in his lap, strained prunes and tapioca pudding oozing into the carpet. He shook his head. His head hurt. "People in the jeep okay?" he asked.

"We're fine," said a teenager with the unbuttoned shirt at his window. "Are you okay?"

Pain shot through his right shoulder and elbow and lodged in his hand. He looked down at his hand and realized that something might be broken. Slowly he turned to face the anxious boy. "Eureka," he said, his eyes watering with pain even as he smiled.

They gave him something for the pain after they took X-rays and punched, kneaded, prodded, and probed. He was glad that Ginger was in the emergency room with him, even more glad that she had ridden with him in the ambulance. He had been near hysteria, not from the pain or fear, but from the absurdity of it all—two blocks from home, his house in sight, his precious car bleeding water and antifreeze and spouting steam, and him immobilized by the idiots from the jeep. He wanted to get home, to see the twins, to tell Ginger he was all right. He heard his own voice babbling, saw his left hand pointing to his house. "No sir, you stay right there, we've called an ambulance, don't move, you might hurt yourself, stay put, sir." A girl was crying somewhere. His frustration was blinding. Finally he made someone understand and someone ran to his house and got his wife. Only then had the sense of helplessness faded.

Now here in the hospital lobby it was back again, only slightly dulled by the painkiller. He held the phone away from his ear to protect his eardrum from Fat Chance's howling. "You're a real pip, Adam, you know that?" The voice carried far in the room. Heads turned. "I know you're serious because you don't have a sense of humor. And if you're serious, you're nuts. Now why don't you go home, go to bed, and . . ."

"Marvyn, have you still got the report?"

"It's right here on my desk. I'm not touching it until Monday morning. I've got a big meeting now, Adam old chap, so I'm going to hang . . ."

"Just look at the injuries, okay? Just open the file and look. Don't they strike you as odd? Marvyn? Are you there, Marvyn?"

"You're off your doodle, Adam. You're bonkers. Goodbye."

Hearing the dial tone was something of a relief.

"He didn't believe you," said Ginger. It was not a question.

Adam didn't really respond to her remark until they were in the cab, and even then he talked as much to keep his mind off the fact that he was on the streets again as to discuss the problem.

"Well," he said. "Well."

"Well?" said Ginger, teasing.

"Well, he's probably right, Ginger. He deals with this sort of thing daily. I don't know anything about it. Imagine my reaction if he was to tell me I had mistranslated a section of *Beowulf*."

"Were."

"What?"

"You said 'if he was,' Adam. You don't make that kind of mistake unless you're upset. Try to relax."

He lapsed into a long silence. Defeat settled like dust on his shoulders. He'd smashed his car. He'd hurt himself and frightened his wife. He'd missed his afternoon classes. He was underpaid, he hadn't saved, he couldn't sell his writing. He was too old for the twins, too old for Ginger, too old to drive, to teach, to think. There wasn't enough money, wasn't enough time, wasn't enough anything. And he'd made a fool of himself in front of Fat Chance—of all people.

"And I use the word loosely," he mumbled.

"What?" said Ginger.

"What?" answered Adam, looking up suddenly as if he'd been caught sleeping in class.

"What did you say, Adam?"

"Damn," he said, surprising even himself. "Driver, take us to 2607 Craig Road, please."

Dark eyes squinted in the rearview mirror. "That okay by you, lady?"

"Yes," said Ginger, and they sat in silence until the cab came to a halt.

"Wait," Clay ordered as he got out of the cab. The driver shrugged and lit a bent cigarette.

Just act as if you know what you're doing, Clay thought as he lengthened his step into what he hoped was a purposeful stride toward Fat Chance's office.

"Marvyn still in, Miss Andress?" he asked almost casually as he passed the desk and reached for the office door.

Miss Andress half rose as if to stop him. "No, Mr. Clay. He's gone for the day."

"Fine," he said as he opened the door. "He said he'd leave a folder on his desk," and with that he was in the office. It wasn't a lie exactly, he told himself, any more than Marvyn's meeting. But at the sight of the desk he felt his confidence drain again. It was chaos, paper piled everywhere. Not a square centimeter of desk top was visible. He walked around the desk and stood at Fat Chance's chair, his eyes dancing furiously for the report. The secretary appeared in the doorway.

"Ah, Miss Address. Now I understand why my brother-in-law requires such a competent secretary." He waved his left hand vaguely, looking helpless. "If you'd be so kind . . ."

Miss Address allowed a smile to twitch at her lips. "Exactly what do you need, Mr. Clay?"

"The Cannon file, please."

She plucked it from the mess with a dextrous flick of a magician's wrist.

"You amaze me, Miss Address. Marvyn would be lost without you, I'm sure."

Another twitch encouraged him.

"Indeed," he continued, "I dare say that he is often lost despite you?" He made it lilt like a question, this time intentionally, and received a genuine smile in return.

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Mr. Clay."

"I'll pretend I didn't say it, Miss Address."

They allowed themselves a small laugh as they left the office.

"I hope you don't have much you need to do, Mr. Clay. Those reports can be so tedious."

"Not much, Miss Address." Just the name of the ambulance attendant, he thought. "Good day."

He was beaming as he got back into the cab. "Home, James," he announced.

The driver jerked his thumb at his ID. "That's Jimbo, Mac."

"Adam," said Ginger as she reached for his hand, "are you all right?"

"All right?" He kissed her cheek. "I was terrific."

It didn't take long for Adam to feel his confidence drain yet once more. The ambulance that had picked up the Cannons was based in DeWitt, in the next county, a rural county with miles of narrow country roads twisting away from the interstate. Too far for a cab. That meant hiring a sitter. It also meant riding in Ginger's '72 Volkswagen Beetle on those roads where traffic came at you just inches away, and the Bug lacked for Adam the comforting dead

weight armor of excess steel. He spent a restless night and decided finally to go, shame winning over fear, because Hogan Lewis, the EMT he had reached, had changed his plans in order to meet with Adam the next morning, and Adam was too embarrassed to call back and cancel.

He survived the drive by concentrating on what he was after and on trying to discover exactly how he had gotten himself into this situation. Why was it so important to pursue this? Cannon's insult? Fat Chance's laughter? This is idiocy, he thought. He had no experience in these matters. Surely he could accept Fat Chance's opinion as valid. Good Lord, he thought suddenly. Is it that I'm seeking Marvyn's approval? The idea horrified him.

"Do you like your brother?" he asked, then realized how strange it must sound since he had said nothing at all for the last fifteen minutes.

Ginger kept her eyes on the road. "Really beautiful country, don't you think?"

"Which one of you is the changeling?"

She smiled and patted his knee.

What he wanted, he finally decided, was a second opinion. He wanted to understand the mechanism of injury.

"Oh, yes, I remember that accident well," said Lewis over a second cup of coffee at his kitchen table. "We're a volunteer service in this county, Mr. Clay. Not enough action around here to support a paid service. We don't see as much as the city units do, thank God. That accident was one of the worst. I remember it too well."

"Did anything . . . do you think . . ." Adam broke off and stared at his coffee, glancing first to Ginger at his right before looking back at Lewis. "I don't know quite what to ask, Mr. Lewis. I've read the reports and the injuries strike me as unusual. But I'm not an expert in these matters."

"Neither am I. Yeah, lots of injuries, bad ones. But it was a bad wreck. You can't believe what the car looked like."

Adam swallowed and found it hard to swallow. "I'm sorry," he said. "This must be unpleasant for you."

"It is," said Lewis. "Not real good for you, either, from the way you look."

Adam felt that Lewis was waiting for something from him, but he had no idea what it was. "I imagine these ambulance calls can be very trying."

Lewis shifted back in his chair. "Can be."

I'm losing him, thought Adam. What am I doing wrong? "Lots

of blood sometimes?" He could think of nothing else to say, but that sounded terrible even as he said it.

"Sometimes," said Lewis.

Ginger's hand brushed Lewis's arm with the lightest of touches. "Mr. Lewis, I guess we should have made it clear that whatever suspicions we have are directed at the occupants of the car only." She met Lewis's eyes for a half second before adding, "Could I have some more coffee, please?" and she reached for the pot.

Lewis leaned forward, put his elbows on the table, and stared into Adam's eyes. "Not that time," he said. "Not *enough* blood that time."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. Clay, you've got to picture what things are like. It's just getting dark. Winter then, remember. I'm sitting down right here, halfway through my supper, when the call comes in. We get out there, it's really dark, but there's headlights and floodlights, the cops' blue lights flashing, our red and whites flashing, big clouds of exhaust fumes, and there's what might have been a car and what might have been people. Noise, dark, cold, adrenalin, death, okay? The woman was dead, anybody could see that right off. The ER doctor wouldn't even let us unload her. We took her right to the morgue. You can't get all of that out of you right away. Something bothered me later that didn't bother me then. There wasn't enough blood at the scene. There was blood around her, on her, but not enough." He paused a second. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Clay, I think she died some time before she went through that windshield."

Clay let his breath out slowly and loudly. "Thank you, Mr. Lewis. I thought that something was wrong here. It is quite a relief to hear you say that."

"No more than it is to me."

"Could I ask you about the husband? He . . ."

"Banged up really bad."

"Anything unusual about the injuries? I have a list here." He passed the emergency room report to Lewis.

Lewis read for a few moments in silence. "Thought that was right," he said softly.

"What, Mr. Lewis?" asked Clay.

"Oh, I see where the broken ribs got the liver. That's what I thought in the field, but no way to tell for sure out there."

"Can you describe the mechanism of injury for the ones on that list? For the liver and ribs?"

"I can try. The guy was wearing his seat belt and shoulder harness way too loose. He'd smack into them hard. The harness could

have gotten the ribs, or he might have had the belts so loose that he got a little of the steering wheel. Belt that loose could help that bladder rupture, too, especially if it's full. Broken left clavicle and, uh, yeah, these deep abdominal contusions—same thing, seat belt too high, shoulder harness too loose."

"Pardon me for saying this, but I thought you said you weren't an expert in these matters."

"A lot of this is textbook answers, Mr. Clay. And I saw that wreck. I *saw* it, understand?"

Adam nodded.

"Let's see," Lewis continued. "Crushed ankle probably from the car just buckling back on his foot. The passenger side was displaced almost six inches back. Lacerations from flying glass. Broken nose? Could be steering wheel, could be missile of some sort. Broken hand, same thing. Fracture of the olecranon process? Now that's harder. That's this bone here, sticks out behind your elbow, part of the joint. Usually takes a direct blow or some strong leverage to break it. Something loose in the back seat, on the ledge, maybe, smacked it from behind. Dislocated shoulder, maybe whatever got his elbow. Maybe just impact. It was a hell of an impact."

"Have you ever connected the husband with your belief that Mrs. Cannon was dead before impact?"

Lewis looked uncomfortable. "Got to, don't you? But I don't see how."

"Have you ever fallen asleep at the wheel, Mr. Lewis?"

"Sorta nodded off once or twice. Hitting the shoulder woke me up."

"Where were your hands when you woke up?"

Lewis sat straighter, closed his eyes, and raised his hands. "On the steering wheel still," he said.

"So were mine, when it's happened to me. If Cannon went to sleep at the wheel, then I think that's where his hands would be, too. But that makes those injuries difficult to explain."

"Maybe he woke up."

"If I had been he and had waked up, I would have hit my brakes. There were no skid marks. I would have swerved. He didn't. Now, Mr. Lewis, would you find all of this easier to explain if Mr. Cannon had hit that bridge on purpose? And would you find broken metacarpals, dislocated shoulder, and fracture of the olecranon process easier to explain if Mr. Cannon had been using his right arm and hand to prop up the body of his dead wife so that she would in fact go through the windshield and hit that abutment, thereby duplicating the expected mechanism of injury and mangling her beyond . . ."

"Of course," whispered Lewis, sinking back into his chair as if suddenly tired. "That's why his belts were so loose—so he could reach over. Her body smashed his arm into the dash on its way out. Why didn't I see it before?"

"I didn't see it, either," said Clay, raising his bandaged right hand, "until it happened to me." He winced at the pain in his shoulder and elbow and quickly added, grinning ruefully at Ginger, "With a bag of groceries, that is."

"You're nuts, you know that? Fruitcake. Bananas."

Fat Chance paused long enough to remove the bitten-off butt of his cigar from his tongue. Clay took advantage while he could.

"Let me lay it out for you, Marv." He'd heard that the night before on a *Dragnet* rerun. He found he was watching more cop shows. "It seems to me that you can't lose here. You forward my report to your boss. One of three things happens. One—he follows up and I'm right and we prove it. You get part of the credit for saving the company big bucks. Maybe a promotion. Two—he follows up but we can't get enough evidence to prove the theory. You're still due for congratulations for hiring good people and for making the company sharper on elaborate fraud cases. Three—I am, as you say, a dessert plate. You blame me and can me and never have to see me again except at family reunions. At best you're a hero. At worst I'm your goat."

Fat Chance stared at Clay while absently picking bits of tobacco from his tongue. "You're right," he said finally. "Nuts, understand, but right."

"Let me talk to him."

"No way. I'll send the report up."

"If I'm wrong, he'll have me to chew out in person. He won't have to chew you to get me."

Fat Chance hit his intercom. "Shirley, see if Mr. Carroll can see Mr. Clay. Tell him it's about possible fraud. Buzz me when you know."

"That's Dr. Clay," said Clay with a genuine smile, "but we'll keep that a family secret, eh, Marv?"

Clay deposited twenty thousand of his bonus in trust funds for the twins. He spent something over three thousand dollars of the rest on a very friendly word processing system to help him write his torrid romance. He gave the rest to Ginger, insisting that she spend it on something frivolous. She had the dents and holes taken out of Brunhilde, had her repainted and polished, and

parked her shining in the driveway as a surprise. The rest she invested.

Everybody was happy. Everest was happy, and paid him a thousand dollars, which was nice of them, if cheap. Mountain Valley Mutual offered Clay a job, which flattered and amused him, and which he politely declined. Even Fat Chance was happy. After Acme, Everest, and Mountain Valley Mutual had convinced Mrs. Cannon's parents that an exhumation would be wise, and after an autopsy found that the heart had been skewered clean through by a thin, round, sharp object, like an ice pick, and after Cannon had pled guilty to reduced charges, Fat Chance even threw his arm around Clay and said to his boss, "Yessir, Mr. Carroll, real proud of this brother-in-law of mine. Threw him this case special. Knew if something smelled, he'd find it." And Clay had stood there, apparently smiling.

So everybody was happy, but Clay had been happiest longest of all. Almost from the first moment that he had edged into Mr. Carroll's chrome and glass office to make his pitch for fraud, he had known things were going to work out.

"How do you do?" he had said. "My name is Adameus Clay."


"Adameus?" puffed Carroll. "Don't you mean Amadeus?"

Clay shrugged apologetically. "My mother meant Amadeus."

"Did she, by thunder?" Carroll boomed. "Well, my name is A. Belk Carroll. My mother, bless her soul, named me for her favorite department store and her favorite brand name patent medicine. Can you guess what the 'A' stands for?"

Clay looked down at the letterhead on the report he was holding. "Acme?" he ventured.

"I've never forgiven her for that," Carroll said, "until now. Sit down, Adameus. I think we're going to like each other."

And they did. 

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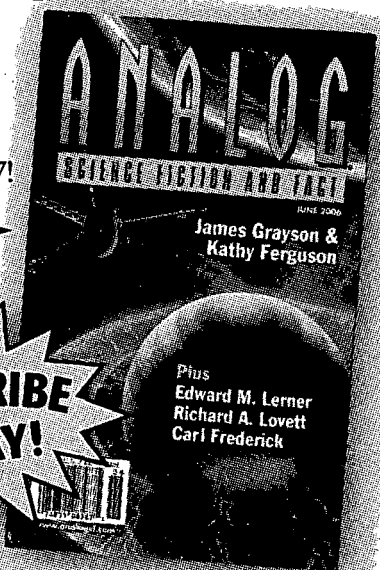
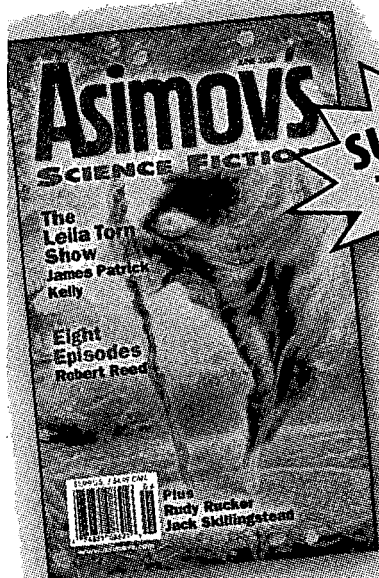
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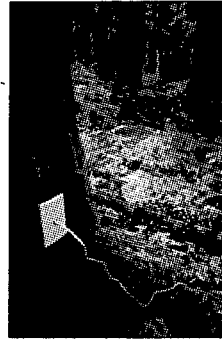
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THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Gene Greenawalt of Carthage, North Carolina. Honorable mentions go to Stuart Brynien of Brooklyn, New York; Judith Fawley of Pensacola, Florida; Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado; J. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Glen A. Hunter of Flagstaff, Arizona; Doug Turnbull of Kingston, Ontario, Canada; John Kirchoff of St. Joseph, Michigan; Tom Woodward of Marietta, Georgia; and Rebecca Campobasso of Yucca Valley, California.



Bryan Mullennis/Photodisc Green/Getty Images

CASTAWAYS

GENE GREENAWALT

"How's it coming, Professor?"
"Making progress, Skipper."

The two men looked at the contraption. The monitor was made from the TV screen in the Movie Star's room, and the modem was a transformed projector that had washed ashore. Salvaged radio parts made excellent conductors, and somehow the Professor used bamboo shoots and coconuts to complete the computer.

The Skipper suspected the tour boat had been sabotaged by the son of the millionaire and his wife. Usually these things were about money. By now the couple had been declared dead, and the son was spending their money while his parents were stranded.

The Skipper knew the boat was sound before setting sail on the three hour tour. Midway through, he ordered the first mate to head for home, when there was an explosion. Fortunately, the bomb was only big enough to take out the engine.

No one was hurt, but after three days of drifting on the Pacific, the five passengers and two crew members were dangerously dehydrated when they washed ashore on a deserted island. That was nearly four years ago.

"It's done," the Professor said, as he tweaked the corroded battery from the ship's backup generator.

"That's great, Professor! How long until we are on the Internet and getting some help?"

"That's the bad part, Skipper," the professor said, as he nodded at the wire running from the modem to a nearby tree. "It's a dial-up connection. We could be here awhile."

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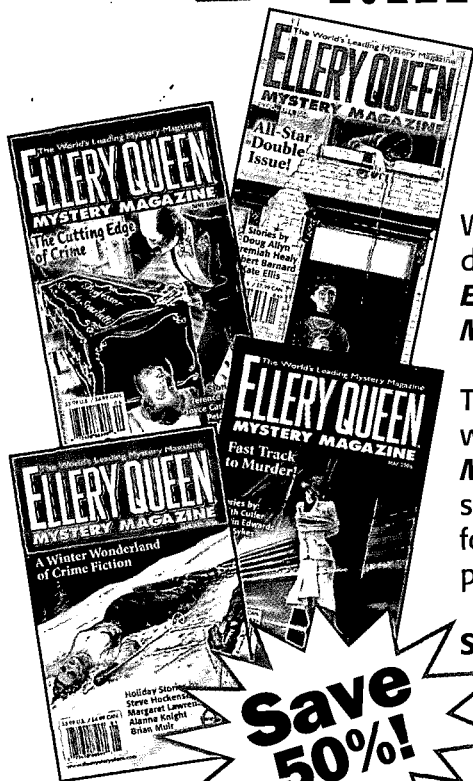
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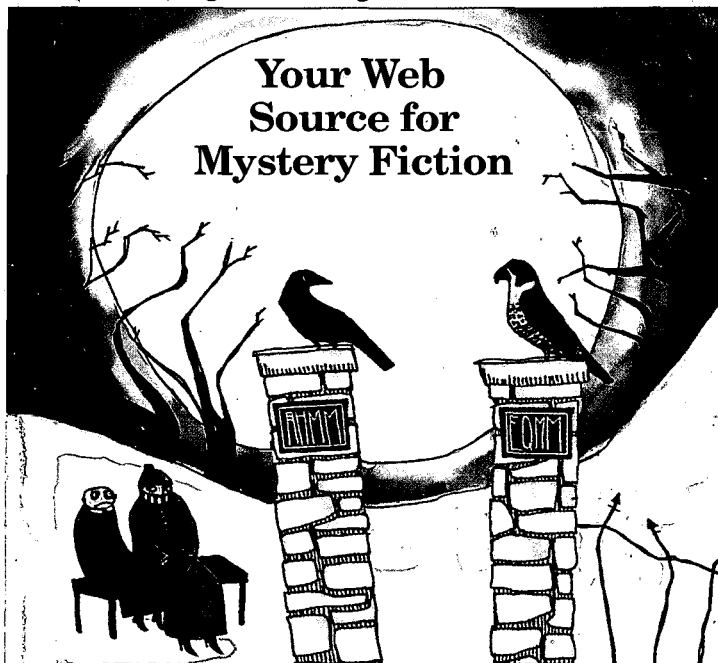
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